children—I don't mind if they would like to go for limousines. But do not lock us in a place where you don't need to live beside us and then say you want to be my 'partner.' I don't accept that kind of 'partner.' No one would—unless he was a fool or had no choice."

But that is the bitter part of it. The same political figures who extol the role of business have made certain that these poor black people would have no real choice. Cutting back the role of government and then suggesting that the poor can turn to businessmen who lobbied for such cuts is cynical indeed. But many black principals in urban schools know very well that they have no alternative; so they learn to swallow their pride, subdue their recognitions and their dignity, and frame their language carefully to win the backing of potential "business partners." At length they are even willing to adjust their schools and their curricula to serve the corporate will: as the woman in Chicago said, to train the ghetto children to be good employees. This is an accomplished fact today. A new generation of black urban school officials has been groomed to settle for a better version of unequal segregated education.

CHAPTER 3

83-132

The Savage Inequalities of Public Education in New York

In a country where there is no distinction of class," Lord Acton wrote of the United States 130 years ago, "a child is not born to the station of its parents, but with an indefinite claim to all the prizes that can be won by thought and labor. It is in conformity with the theory of equality . . . to give as near as possible to every youth an equal state in life." Americans, he said, "are unwilling that any should be deprived in childhood of the means of competition."

It is hard to read these words today without a sense of irony and sadness. Denial of "the means of competition" is perhaps the single most consistent outcome of the education offered to poor children in the schools of our large cities; and nowhere is this pattern of denial more explicit or more absolute than in the public schools of New York City.

Average expenditures per pupil in the city of New York in 1987 were some $5,500. In the highest spending suburbs of New York (Great Neck or Manhasset, for example, on Long Island) funding levels rose above $11,000, with the

highest districts in the state at $15,000. "Why . . . ," asks the city's Board of Education, "should our students receive less" than do "similar students" who live elsewhere? "The inequity is clear."

But the inequality to which these words refer goes even further than the school board may be eager to reveal. "It is perhaps the supreme irony," says the nonprofit Community Service Society of New York, that "the same Board of Education which perceives so clearly the inequities" of funding between separate towns and cities "is perpetuating similar inequities" right in New York. And, in comment on the Board of Education's final statement—"the inequity is clear" —the CSS observes, "New York City's poorest . . . districts could adopt that eloquent statement with few changes."

New York City's public schools are subdivided into 32 school districts. District 10 encompasses a large part of the Bronx but is, effectively, two separate districts. One of these districts, Riverdale, is in the northwest section of the Bronx. Home to many of the city's most sophisticated and well-educated families, its elementary schools have relatively few low-income students. The other section, to the south and east, is poor and heavily nonwhite.

The contrast between public schools in each of these two neighborhoods is obvious to any visitor. At Public School 24 in Riverdale, the principal speaks enthusiastically of his teaching staff. At Public School 79, serving poorer children to the south, the principal says that he is forced to take the "tenth-best" teachers. "I thank God they're still breathing," he remarks of those from whom he must select his teachers.

Some years ago, District 10 received an allocation for computers. The local board decided to give each elementary school an equal number of computers, even though the schools in Riverdale had smaller classes and far fewer students. When it was pointed out that schools in Riverdale, as a result, had twice the number of computers in proportion to their student populations as the schools in the poor neighborhoods, the chairman of the local board replied, "What is fair is what is determined . . . to be fair."

The superintendent of District 10, Fred Goldberg, tells the *New York Times* that "every effort" is made "to distribute

resources equitably." He speculates that some gap might exist because some of the poorer schools need to use funds earmarked for computers to buy basic supplies like pens and paper. Asked about the differences in teachers noted by the principals, he says there are no differences, then adds that next year he'll begin a program to improve the quality of teachers in the poorer schools. Questioned about differences in physical appearances between the richer and the poorer schools, he says, "I think it's demographics."

Sometimes a school principal, whatever his background or his politics, looks into the faces of the children in his school and offers a disarming statement that cuts through official ambiguity. "These are the kids most in need," says Edward Flanery, the principal of one of the low-income schools, "and they get the worst teachers." For children of diverse needs in his overcrowded rooms, he says, "you need an outstanding teacher. And what do you get? You get the worst."

In order to find Public School 261 in District 10, a visitor is told to look for a mortician's office. The funeral home, which faces Jerome Avenue in the North Bronx, is easy to identify by its green awning. The school is next door, in a former roller-skating rink. No sign identifies the building as a school. A metal awning frame without an awning supports a flagpole, but there is no flag.

In the street in front of the school there is an elevated public transit line. Heavy traffic fills the street. The existence of the school is virtually concealed within this crowded city block.

In a vestibule between the outer and inner glass doors of the school there is a sign with these words: "All children are capable of learning."

Beyond the inner doors a guard is seated. The lobby is long and narrow. The ceiling is low. There are no windows. All the teachers that I see at first are middle-aged white women. The principal, who is also a white woman, tells me that the school's "capacity" is 900 but that there are 1,300 children here. The size of classes for fifth and sixth grade children in New York, she says, is "capped" at 32, but she

says that class size in the school goes "up to 34." (I later see classes, however, as large as 37.) Classes for younger children, she goes on, are "capped at 25," but a school can go above this limit if it puts an extra adult in the room. Lack of space, she says, prevents the school from operating a prekindergarten program.

I ask the principal where her children go to school. They are enrolled in private school, she says.

"Lunchtime is a challenge for us," she explains. "Limited space obliges us to do it in three shifts, 450 children at a time."

Textbooks are scarce and children have to share their social studies books. The principal says there is one full-time pupil counselor and another who is here two days a week: a ratio of 930 children to one counselor. The carpets are patched and sometimes taped together to conceal an open space. "I could use some new rugs," she observes.

To make up for the building's lack of windows and the crowded feeling that results, the staff puts plants and fish tanks in the corridors. Some of the plants are flourishing. Two boys, released from class, are in a corridor beside a tank, their noses pressed against the glass. A school of pinkish fish inside the tank are darting back and forth. Farther down the corridor a small Hispanic girl is watering the plants.

Two first grade classes share a single room without a window, divided only by a blackboard. Four kindergartens and a sixth grade class of Spanish-speaking children have been packed into a single room in which, again, there is no window. A second grade bilingual class of 37 children has its own room but again there is no window.

By eleven o'clock, the lunchroom is already packed with appetite and life. The kids line up to get their meals, then eat them in ten minutes. After that, with no place they can go to play, they sit and wait until it's time to line up and go back to class.

On the second floor I visit four classes taking place within another undivided space. The room has a low ceiling. File cabinets and movable blackboards give a small degree of isolation to each class. Again, there are no windows.

The library is a tiny, windowless and claustrophobic room. I count approximately 700 books. Seeing no reference books, I ask a teacher if encyclopedias and other reference books are kept in classrooms.

"We don't have encyclopedias in classrooms," she replies. "That is for the suburbs."

The school, I am told, has 26 computers for its 1,300 children. There is one small gym and children get one period, and sometimes two, each week. Recess, however, is not possible because there is no playground. "Head Start," the principal says, "scarcely exists in District 10. We have no space."

The school, I am told, is 90 percent black and Hispanic; the other 10 percent are Asian, white or Middle Eastern.

In a sixth grade social studies class the walls are bare of words or decorations. There seems to be no ventilation system, or, if one exists, it isn't working.

The class discusses the Nile River and the Fertile Crescent.

The teacher, in a droning voice: "How is it useful that these civilizations developed close to rivers?"

A child, in a good loud voice: "What kind of question is that?"

In my notes I find these words: "An uncomfortable feeling—being in a building with no windows. There are metal ducts across the room. Do they give air? I feel asphyxiated. . . ."

On the top floor of the school, a sixth grade of 30 children shares a room with 29 bilingual second graders. Because of the high class size there is an assistant with each teacher. This means that 59 children and four grown-ups—63 in all—must share a room that, in a suburban school, would hold no more than 20 children and one teacher. There are, at least, some outside windows in this room—it is the only room with windows in the school—and the room has a high ceiling. It is a relief to see some daylight.

I return to see the kindergarten classes on the ground floor and feel stifled once again by lack of air and the low ceiling. Nearly 120 children and adults are doing what they can to make the best of things: 80 children in four kinder-

garten classes, 30 children in the sixth grade class, and about eight grown-ups who are aides and teachers. The kindergarten children sitting on the worn rug, which is patched with tape, look up at me and turn their heads to follow me as I walk past them.

As I leave the school, a sixth grade teacher stops to talk. I ask her, "Is there air conditioning in warmer weather?"

Teachers, while inside the building, are reluctant to give answers to this kind of question. Outside, on the sidewalk, she is less constrained: "I had an awful room last year. In the winter it was 56 degrees. In the summer it was up to 90. It was sweltering."

I ask her, "Do the children ever comment on the building?"

"They don't say," she answers, "but they know."

I ask her if they see it as a racial message.

"All these children see TV," she says. "They know what suburban schools are like. Then they look around them at their school. This was a roller-rink, you know. . . . They don't comment on it but you see it in their eyes. They understand."

On the following morning I visit P.S. 79, another elementary school in the same district. "We work under difficult circumstances," says the principal, James Carter, who is black. "The school was built to hold one thousand students. We have 1,550. We are badly overcrowded. We need smaller classes but, to do this, we would need more space. I can't add five teachers. I would have no place to put them."

Some experts, I observe, believe that class size isn't a real issue. He dismisses this abruptly. "It doesn't take a genius to discover that you learn more in a smaller class. I have to bus some 60 kindergarten children elsewhere, since I have no space for them. When they return next year, where do I put them?

"I can't set up a computer lab. I have no room. I had to put a class into the library. I have no librarian. There are two gymnasiums upstairs but they cannot be used for sports. We hold more classes there. It's unfair to measure us against the

suburbs. They have 17 to 20 children in a class. Average class size in this school is 30.

"The school is 29 percent black, 70 percent Hispanic. Few of these kids get Head Start. There is no space in the district. Of 200 kindergarten children, 50 maybe get some kind of preschool."

I ask him how much difference preschool makes.

"Those who get it do appreciably better. I can't overestimate its impact but, as I have said, we have no space."

The school tracks children by ability, he says. "There are five to seven levels in each grade. The highest level is equivalent to 'gifted' but it's not a full-scale gifted program. We don't have the funds. We have no science room. The science teachers carry their equipment with them."

We sit and talk within the nurse's room. The window is broken. There are two holes in the ceiling. About a quarter of the ceiling has been patched and covered with a plastic garbage bag.

"Ideal class size for these kids would be 15 to 20. Will these children ever get what white kids in the suburbs take for granted? I don't think so. If you ask me why, I'd have to speak of race and social class. I don't think the powers that be in New York City understand, or want to understand, that if they do not give these children a sufficient education to lead healthy and productive lives, we will be their victims later on. We'll pay the price someday—in violence, in economic costs. I despair of making this appeal in any terms but these. You cannot issue an appeal to conscience in New York today. The fair-play argument won't be accepted. So you speak of violence and hope that it will scare the city into action."

While we talk, three children who look six or seven years old come to the door and ask to see the nurse, who isn't in the school today. One of the children, a Puerto Rican girl, looks haggard. "I have a pain in my tooth," she says. The principal says, "The nurse is out. Why don't you call your mother?" The child says, "My mother doesn't have a phone." The principal sighs. "Then go back to your class." When she leaves, the principal is angry. "It's amazing to me that these

children ever make it with the obstacles they face. Many *do* care and they *do* try, but there's a feeling of despair. The parents of these children want the same things for their children that the parents in the suburbs want. Drugs are not the cause of this. They are the symptom. Nonetheless, they're used by people in the suburbs and rich people in Manhattan as another reason to keep children of poor people at a distance."

I ask him, "Will white children and black children ever go to school together in New York?"

"I don't see it," he replies. "I just don't think it's going to happen. It's a dream. I simply do not see white folks in Riverdale agreeing to cross-bus with kids like these. A few, maybe. Very few. I don't think I'll live to see it happen."

I ask him whether race is the decisive factor. Many experts, I observe, believe that wealth is more important in determining these inequalities.

"This," he says—and sweeps his hand around him at the room, the garbage bag, the ceiling—"would not happen to white children."

In a kindergarten class the children sit cross-legged on a carpet in a space between two walls of books. Their 26 faces are turned up to watch their teacher, an elderly black woman. A little boy who sits beside me is involved in trying to tie bows in his shoelaces. The children sing a song: "Lift Every Voice." On the wall are these handwritten words: "Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people."

In a very small room on the fourth floor, 52 people in two classes do their best to teach and learn. Both are first grade classes. One, I am informed, is "low ability." The other is bilingual.

"The room is barely large enough for one class," says the principal.

The room is 25 by 50 feet. There are 26 first graders and two adults on the left, 22 others and two adults on the right. On the wall there is the picture of a small white child, circled by a Valentine, and a Gainsborough painting of a child in a formal dress.

"We are handicapped by scarcity," one of the teachers

says. "One fifth of these children may be at grade level by the year's end."

A boy who may be seven years old climbs on my lap without an invitation and removes my glasses. He studies my face and runs his fingers through my hair. "You have nice hair," he says. I ask him where he lives and he replies, "Times Square Hotel," which is a homeless shelter in Manhattan.

I ask him how he gets here.

"With my father. On the train," he says.

"How long does it take?"

"It takes an hour and a half."

I ask him when he leaves his home.

"My mother wakes me up at five o'clock."

"When do you leave?"

"Six-thirty."

I ask him how he gets back to Times Square.

"My father comes to get me after school."

From my notes: "He rides the train three hours every day in order to attend this segregated school. It would be a shorter ride to Riverdale. There are rapid shuttle-vans that make that trip in only 20 minutes. Why not let him go to school right in Manhattan, for that matter?"

At three o'clock the nurse arrives to do her recordkeeping. She tells me she is here three days a week. "The public hospital we use for an emergency is called North Central. It's not a hospital that I will use if I am given any choice. Clinics in the private hospitals are far more likely to be staffed by an experienced physician."

She hesitates a bit as I take out my pen, but then goes on: "I'll give you an example. A little girl I saw last week in school was trembling and shaking and could not control the motions of her arms. I was concerned and called her home. Her mother came right up to school and took her to North Central. The intern concluded that the child was upset by 'family matters'—nothing more—that there was nothing wrong with her. The mother was offended by the diagnosis. She did not appreciate his words or his assumptions. The truth is, there was nothing wrong at home. She brought the child back to school. I thought that she was ill. I told her

mother, 'Go to Montefiore.' It's a private hospital, and well respected. She took my advice, thank God. It turned out that the child had a neurological disorder. She is now in treatment.

"This is the kind of thing our children face. Am I saying that the city underserves this population? You can draw your own conclusions."

Out on the street, it takes a full half hour to flag down a cab. Taxi drivers in New York are sometimes disconcertingly direct in what they say. When they are contemptuous of poor black people, their contempt is unadorned. When they're sympathetic and compassionate, their observations often go right to the heart of things. "Oh . . . they neglect these children," says the driver. "They leave them in the streets and slums to live and die." We stop at a light. Outside the window of the taxi, aimless men are standing in a semicircle while another man is working on his car. Old four-story buildings with their windows boarded, cracked or missing are on every side.

I ask the driver where he's from. He says Afghanistan. Turning in his seat, he gestures at the street and shrugs. "If you don't, as an American, begin to give these kids the kind of education that you give the kids of Donald Trump, you're asking for disaster."

Two months later, on a day in May, I visit an elementary school in Riverdale. The dogwoods and magnolias on the lawn in front of P.S. 24 are in full blossom on the day I visit. There is a well-tended park across the street, another larger park three blocks away. To the left of the school is a playground for small children, with an innovative jungle gym, a slide and several climbing toys. Behind the school there are two playing fields for older kids. The grass around the school is neatly trimmed.

The neighborhood around the school, by no means the richest part of Riverdale, is nonetheless expensive and quite beautiful. Residences in the area—some of which are large, free-standing houses, others condominiums in solid red-brick buildings—sell for prices in the region of $400,000; but some of the larger Tudor houses on the winding and

tree-shaded streets close to the school can cost up to $1 million. The excellence of P.S. 24, according to the principal, adds to the value of these homes. Advertisements in the *New York Times* will frequently inform prospective buyers that a house is "in the neighborhood of P.S. 24."

The school serves 825 children in the kindergarten through sixth grade. This is approximately half the student population crowded into P.S. 79, where 1,550 children fill a space intended for 1,000, and a great deal smaller than the 1,300 children packed into the former skating rink; but the principal of P.S. 24, a capable and energetic man named David Rothstein, still regards it as excessive for an elementary school.

The school is integrated in the strict sense that the middle- and upper-middle-class white children here do occupy a building that contains some Asian and Hispanic and black children; but there is little integration in the classrooms since the vast majority of the Hispanic and black children are assigned to "special" classes on the basis of evaluations that have classified them "EMR"—"educable mentally retarded" —or else, in the worst of cases, "TMR"—"trainable mentally retarded."

I ask the principal if any of his students qualify for free-lunch programs. "About 130 do," he says. "Perhaps another 35 receive their lunches at reduced price. Most of these kids are in the special classes. They do not come from this neighborhood."

The very few nonwhite children that one sees in mainstream classes tend to be Japanese or else of other Asian origins. Riverdale, I learn, has been the residence of choice for many years to members of the diplomatic corps.

The school therefore contains effectively two separate schools: one of about 130 children, most of whom are poor, Hispanic, black, assigned to one of the 12 special classes; the other of some 700 mainstream students, almost all of whom are white or Asian.

There is a third track also—this one for the students who are labeled "talented" or "gifted." This is termed a "pull-out" program since the children who are so identified remain in mainstream classrooms but are taken out for certain pe-

riods each week to be provided with intensive and, in my opinion, excellent instruction in some areas of reasoning and logic often known as "higher-order skills" in the contemporary jargon of the public schools. Children identified as "gifted" are admitted to this program in first grade and, in most cases, will remain there for six years. Even here, however, there are two tracks of the gifted. The regular gifted classes are provided with only one semester of this specialized instruction yearly. Those very few children, on the other hand, who are identified as showing the most promise are assigned, beginning in the third grade, to a program that receives a full-year regimen.

In one such class, containing ten intensely verbal and impressive fourth grade children, nine are white and one is Asian. The "special" class I enter first, by way of contrast, has twelve children of whom only one is white and none is Asian. These racial breakdowns prove to be predictive of the schoolwide pattern.

In a classroom for the gifted on the first floor of the school, I ask a child what the class is doing. "Logic and syllogisms," she replies. The room is fitted with a planetarium. The principal says that all the elementary schools in District 10 were given the same planetariums ten years ago but that certain schools, because of overcrowding, have been forced to give them up. At P.S. 261, according to my notes, there was a domelike space that had been built to hold a planetarium, but the planetarium had been removed to free up space for the small library collection. P.S. 24, in contrast, has a spacious library that holds almost 8,000 books. The windows are decorated with attractive, brightly colored curtains and look out on flowering trees. The principal says that it's inadequate, but it appears spectacular to me after the cubicle that holds a meager 700 books within the former skating rink.

The district can't afford librarians, the principal says, but P.S. 24, unlike the poorer schools of District 10, can draw on educated parent volunteers who staff the room in shifts three days a week. A parent organization also raises independent funds to buy materials, including books, and will soon be running a fund-raiser to enhance the library's collection.

In a large and sunny first grade classroom that I enter

next, I see 23 children, all of whom are white or Asian. In another first grade, there are 22 white children and two others who are Japanese. There is a computer in each class. Every classroom also has a modern fitted sink.

In a second grade class of 22 children, there are two black children and three Asian children. Again, there is a sink and a computer. A sixth grade social studies class has only one black child. The children have an in-class research area that holds some up-to-date resources. A set of encyclopedias (World Book, 1985) is in a rack beside a window. The children are doing a Spanish language lesson when I enter. Foreign languages begin in sixth grade at the school, but Spanish is offered also to the kindergarten children. As in every room at P.S. 24, the window shades are clean and new, the floor is neatly tiled in gray and green, and there is not a single light bulb missing.

Walking next into a special class, I see twelve children. One is white. Eleven are black. There are no Asian children. The room is half the size of mainstream classrooms. "Because of overcrowding," says the principal, "we have had to split these rooms in half." There is no computer and no sink.

I enter another special class. Of seven children, five are black, one is Hispanic, one is white. A little black boy with a large head sits in the far corner and is gazing at the ceiling.

"Placement of these kids," the principal explains, "can usually be traced to neurological damage."

In my notes: "How could so many of these children be brain-damaged?"

Next door to the special class is a woodworking shop. "This shop is only for the special classes," says the principal. The children learn to punch in time cards at the door, he says, in order to prepare them for employment.

The fourth grade gifted class, in which I spend the last part of the day, is humming with excitement. "I start with these children in the first grade," says the teacher. "We pull them out of mainstream classes on the basis of their test results and other factors such as the opinion of their teachers. Out of this group, beginning in third grade, I pull out the ones who show the most potential, and they enter classes such as this one."

The curriculum they follow, she explains, "emphasizes critical thinking, reasoning and logic." The planetarium, for instance, is employed not simply for the study of the universe as it exists. "Children also are designing their own galaxies," the teacher says.

A little girl sitting around a table with her classmates speaks with perfect poise: "My name is Susan. We are in the fourth grade gifted program."

I ask them what they're doing and a child says, "My name is Laurie and we're doing problem-solving."

A rather tall, good-natured boy who is half-standing at the table tells me that his name is David. "One thing that we do," he says, "is logical thinking. Some problems, we find, have more than one good answer. We need to learn not simply to be logical in our own thinking but to show respect for someone else's logic even when an answer may be technically incorrect."

When I ask him to explain this, he goes on, "A person who gives an answer that is not 'correct' may nonetheless have done some interesting thinking that we should examine. 'Wrong' answers may be more useful to examine than correct ones."

I ask the children if reasoning and logic are innate or if they're things that you can learn.

"You know some things to start with when you enter school," Susan says. "But we also learn some things that other children don't."

I ask her to explain this.

"We know certain things that other kids don't know because we're *taught* them."

She has braces on her teeth. Her long brown hair falls almost to her waist. Her loose white T-shirt has the word TRI-LOGIC on the front. She tells me that Tri-Logic is her father's firm.

Laurie elaborates on the same point: "Some things you know. Some kinds of logic are inside of you to start with. There are other things that someone needs to teach you."

David expands on what the other two have said: "Everyone can think and speak in logical ways unless they have a

mental problem. What this program does is bring us to a higher form of logic."

The class is writing a new "Bill of Rights." The children already know the U.S. Bill of Rights and they explain its first four items to me with precision. What they are examining today, they tell me, is the very *concept* of a "right." Then they will create their own compendium of rights according to their own analysis and definition. Along one wall of the classroom, opposite the planetarium, are seven Apple II computers on which children have developed rather subtle color animations that express the themes—of greed and domination, for example—that they also have described in writing.

"This is an upwardly mobile group," the teacher later says. "They have exposure to whatever New York City has available. Their parents may take them to the theater, to museums. . . ."

In my notes: "Six girls, four boys. Nine white, one Chinese. I am glad they have this class. But what about the others? Aren't there ten black children in the school who could enjoy this also?"

The teacher gives me a newspaper written, edited and computer-printed by her sixth grade gifted class. The children, she tells me, are provided with a link to kids in Europe for transmission of news stories.

A science story by one student asks if scientists have ever falsified their research. "Gregor Mendel," the sixth grader writes, "the Austrian monk who founded the science of genetics, published papers on his work with peas that some experts say were statistically too good to be true. Isaac Newton, who formulated the law of gravitation, relied on unseemly mathematical sleight of hand in his calculations. . . . Galileo Galilei, founder of modern scientific method, wrote about experiments that were so difficult to duplicate that colleagues doubted he had done them."

Another item in the paper, also by a sixth grade student, is less esoteric: "The Don Cossacks dance company, from Russia, is visiting the United States. The last time it toured America was 1976. . . . The Don Cossacks will be in New York City for two weeks at the Neil Simon Theater. Don't miss it!"

The tone is breezy—and so confident! That phrase—"Don't miss it!"—speaks a volume about life in Riverdale.

"What makes a good school?" asks the principal when we are talking later on. "The building and teachers are part of it, of course. But it isn't just the building and the teachers. Our kids come from good families and the neighborhood is good. In a three-block area we have a public library, a park, a junior high. . . . Our typical sixth grader reads at eighth grade level." In a quieter voice he says, "I see how hard my colleagues work in schools like P.S. 79. You have children in those neighborhoods who live in virtual hell. They enter school five years behind. What do they get?" Then, as he spreads his hands out on his desk, he says: "I have to ask myself why there should be an elementary school in District 10 with fifteen hundred children. Why should there be an elementary school within a skating rink? Why should the Board of Ed allow this? This is not the way that things should be."

Stark as the inequities in District 10 appear, educators say that they are "mild" in comparison to other situations in the city. Some of the most stunning inequality, according to a report by the Community Service Society, derives from allocations granted by state legislators to school districts where they have political allies. The poorest districts in the city get approximately 90 cents per pupil from these legislative grants, while the richest districts have been given $14 for each pupil.

Newspapers in New York City have reported other instances of the misallocation of resources. "The Board of Education," wrote the *New York Post* during July of 1987, "was hit with bombshell charges yesterday that money earmarked for fighting drug abuse and illiteracy in ghetto schools was funneled instead to schools in wealthy areas."

In receipt of extra legislative funds, according to the *Post*, affluent districts were funded "at a rate 14 times greater than low-income districts." The paper said the city's poorest areas were underfunded "with stunning consistency."

The report by the Community Service Society cites an official of the New York City Board of Education who re-

marks that there is "no point" in putting further money "into some poor districts" because, in his belief, "new teachers would not stay there." But the report observes that, in an instance where beginning teacher salaries were raised by nearly half, "that problem largely disappeared"—another interesting reminder of the difference money makes when we are willing to invest it. Nonetheless, says the report, "the perception that the poorest districts are beyond help still remains. . . ." Perhaps the worst result of such beliefs, says the report, is the message that resources would be "wasted on poor children." This message "trickles down to districts, schools, and classrooms." Children hear and understand this theme—they are poor investments—and behave accordingly. If society's resources would be wasted on their destinies, perhaps their own determination would be wasted too. "Expectations are a powerful force . . . ," the CSS observes.

Despite the evidence, the CSS report leans over backwards not to fuel the flames of racial indignation. "In the present climate," the report says, "suggestions of racism must be made with caution. However, it is inescapable that these inequities are being perpetrated on [school] districts which are virtually all black and Hispanic. . . ." While the report says, very carefully, that there is no "evidence" of "deliberate individual discrimination," it nonetheless concludes that "those who allocate resources make decisions over and over again which penalize the poorest districts." Analysis of city policy, the study says, "speaks to systemic bias which constitutes a conspiracy of effect. . . . Whether consciously or not, the system writes off its poorest students."

It is not only at the grade-school level that inequities like these are seen in New York City. Morris High School in the South Bronx, for example, says a teacher who has taught here more than 20 years, "does everything an inanimate object can do to keep children from being educated."

Blackboards at the school, according to the *New York Times*, are "so badly cracked that teachers are afraid to let students write on them for fear they'll cut themselves. Some mornings, fallen chips of paint cover classrooms like snow. . . . Teachers and students have come to see humor in the

waterfall that courses down six flights of stairs after a heavy rain."

One classroom, we are told, has been sealed off "because of a gaping hole in the floor." In the band room, "chairs are positioned where acoustic tiles don't fall quite so often." In many places, "plaster and ceramic tile have peeled off" the walls, leaving the external brick wall of the school exposed. "There isn't much between us and the great outdoors," the principal reports.

A "landscape of hopelessness"—"burnt-out apartments, boarded windows, vacant lot upon garbage-strewn vacant lot"—surrounds the school. Statistics tell us, says the *Times*, that the South Bronx is "the poorest congressional district in the United States." But statistics cannot tell us "what it means to a child to leave his often hellish home and go to a school—his hope for a transcendent future—that is literally falling apart."

The head of school facilities for the Board of Education speaks of classrooms unrepaired years after having been destroyed by fire. "What's really sad," she notes, "is that so many kids come from places that look as bad as our schools—and we have nothing better to offer them."

A year later, when I visit Morris High, most of these conditions are unchanged. Water still cascades down the stairs. Plaster is still falling from the walls. Female students tell me that they shower after school to wash the plaster from their hair. Entering ninth grade children at the school, I'm told, read about four years behind grade level.

From the street, the school looks like a medieval castle; its turreted tower rises high above the devastated lots below. A plaque in the principal's office tells a visitor that this is the oldest high school in the Bronx.

The first things that one senses in the building are the sweetness, the real innocence, of many of the children, the patience and determination of the teachers, and the shameful disrepair of the surroundings. The principal is unsparing in her honesty. "The first floor," she tells me as we head off to the stairwell, "isn't bad—unless you go into the gym or auditorium." It's the top two floors, she says, the fourth and

fifth floors, that reveal the full extent of Morris High's neglect by New York City's Board of Education.

Despite her warning, I am somewhat stunned to see a huge hole in the ceiling of the stairwell on the school's fourth floor. The plaster is gone, exposing rusted metal bars embedded in the outside wall. It will cost as much as $50 million to restore the school to an acceptable condition, she reports.

Jack Forman, the head of the English department, is a scholarly and handsome gray-haired man whose academic specialty is British literature. Sitting in his office in a pinstripe shirt and red suspenders, his feet up on the table, he is interrupted by a stream of kids. A tiny ninth grade student seems to hesitate outside the office door. Forman invites her to come in and, after she has given him a message ("Carmen had to leave—for an emergency") and gone to her next class, his face breaks out into a smile. "She's a lovely little kid. These students live in a tough neighborhood, but they are children and I speak to them as children."

Forman says that freshman English students get a solid diet of good reading: *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, some African fiction, a number of Greek tragedies. "We're implementing an AP course ["advanced placement"—for pre-college students] for the first time. We don't know how many children will succeed in it, but we intend to try. Our mission is to stretch their minds, to give them every chance to grow beyond their present expectations.

"I have strong feelings about getting past the basics. Too many schools are stripping down curriculum to meet the pressure for success on tests that measure only minimal skills. That's why I teach a theater course. Students who don't respond to ordinary classes may surprise us, and surprise themselves, when they are asked to step out on a stage.

"I have a student, Carlos, who had dropped out once and then returned. He had no confidence in his ability. Then he began to act. He memorized the part of Pyramus. Then he played Sebastian in *The Tempest*. He had a photographic memory. Amazing! He will graduate, I hope, this June.

"Now, if we didn't have that theater program, you have got to ask if Carlos would have stayed in school."

In a sun-drenched corner room on the top floor, a female teacher and some 25 black and Hispanic children are reading a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Holes in the walls and ceiling leave exposed the structural brick. The sun appears to blind the teacher. There are no shades. Sheets of torn construction paper have been taped to windowpanes, but the glare is quite relentless. The children look forlorn and sleepy.

I know why the caged bird sings. . . .
It is not a carol of joy. . . .

"This is your homework," says the teacher. "Let's get on with it."

But the children cannot seem to wake up to the words. A 15-year-old boy, wearing a floppy purple hat, white jersey and striped baggy pants, is asked to read the lines.

I know what the caged bird feels . . .
When the wind stirs soft through the
springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass. . . .

A 15-year-old girl with curly long red hair and many freckles reads the lines. Her T-shirt hangs down almost to her knees.

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars.

A boy named Victor, sitting at my side, whispers the words: "I know why the caged bird beats his wing. . . . His blood is red. He wants to spread his wings."

The teacher asks the children what the poet means or what the imagery conveys. There is no response at first. Then Victor lifts his hand. "The poem is about ancient days

of slavery," he says. "The bird destroys himself because he can't escape the cage."

"Why does he sing?" the teacher asks.

"He sings out of the longing to be free."

At the end of class the teacher tells me, "Forty, maybe 45 percent out of this group will graduate."

The counseling office is the worst room I have seen. There is a large blue barrel by the window.

"When it rains," one of the counselors says, "that barrel will be full." I ask her how the kids react. "They would like to see the rain stop in the office," she replies.

The counselor seems to like the kids and points to three young women sitting at a table in the middle of the room. One of them, an elegant tall girl with long dark hair, is studying her homework. She's wearing jeans, a long black coat, a black turtleneck, a black hat with a bright red band. "I love the style of these kids," the counselor says.

A very shy light-skinned girl waits by the desk. A transfer from another school, she's with her father. They fill out certain transfer forms and ask the counselor some questions. The father's earnestness, his faith in the importance of these details, and the child's almost painful shyness stay in my mind later.

At eleven o'clock, about 200 children in a top-floor room are watching Forman's theater class performing *The Creation* by James Weldon Johnson. Next, a gospel choir sings—"I once was lost and now am found"—and then a tall black student gives a powerful delivery of a much-recited speech of Martin Luther King while another student does an agonizing, slow-paced slave ballet. The students seem mesmerized. The speaker's voice is strong and filled with longing.

"One day, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

But the register of enrollment given to me by the principal reflects the demographics of continued racial segregation: Of the students in this school, 38 percent are black, 62 percent Hispanic. There are no white children in the building.

The session ends with a terrific fast jazz concert by a

band composed of students dressed in black ties, crimson jackets and white shirts. A student with a small trimmed beard and mustache stands to do a solo on the saxophone. The pianist is the same young man who read the words of Martin Luther King. His solo, on a battered Baldwin, brings the students to their feet.

Victor Acosta and eight other boys and girls meet with me in the freshman counselors' office. They talk about "the table of brotherhood"—the words of Dr. King that we have heard recited by the theater class upstairs.

"We are not yet seated at that table," Victor says.

"The table is set but no one's in the chairs," says a black student who, I later learn, is named Carissa.

Alexander, a 16-year-old student who was brought here by his parents from Jamaica just a year ago, says this: "You can understand things better when you go among the wealthy. You look around you at their school, although it's impolite to do that, and you take a deep breath at the sight of all those beautiful surroundings. Then you come back home and see that these are things you do not have. You think of the difference. Not at first. It takes a while to settle in."

I ask him why these differences exist.

"Let me answer that," says Israel, a small, wiry Puerto Rican boy. "If you threw us all into some different place, some ugly land, and put white children in this building in our place, this school would start to shine. No question. The parents would say: 'This building sucks. It's ugly. Fix it up.' They'd fix it fast—no question.

"People on the outside," he goes on, "may think that we don't know what it is like for other students, but we *visit* other schools and we have eyes and we have brains. You cannot hide the differences. You see it and compare. . . .

"Most of the students in this school won't go to college. Many of them will join the military. If there's a war, we have to fight. Why should I go to war and fight for opportunities I can't enjoy—for things rich people value, for their freedom, but I do not *have* that freedom and I can't go to their schools?"

"You tell your friends, 'I go to Morris High,'" Carissa says. "They make a face. How does that make you feel?" She

points to the floor beside the water barrel. "I found wild mushrooms growing in that corner."

"Big fat ugly things with hairs," says Victor.

Alexander then begins an explanation of the way that inequality becomes ensconced. "See," he says, "the parents of rich children have the money to get into better schools. Then, after a while, they begin to say, 'Well, I have this. Why not keep it for my children?' In other words, it locks them into the idea of always having something more. After that, these things—the extra things they have—are seen like an *inheritance*. They feel it's theirs and they don't understand why we should question it.

"See, that's where the trouble starts. They get used to what they have. They think it's theirs by rights because they had it from the start. So it leaves those children with a legacy of greed. I don't think most people understand this."

One of the counselors, who sits nearby, looks at me and then at Alexander. Later he says, "It's quite remarkable how much these children see. You wouldn't know it from their academic work. Most of them write poorly. There is a tremendous gulf between their skills and capabilities. This gulf, this dissonance, is frightening. I mean, it says so much about the squandering of human worth. . . ."

I ask the students if they can explain the reasons for the physical condition of the school.

"Hey, it's like a welfare hospital! You're getting it for free," says Alexander. "You have no power to complain."

"Is money really everything?" I ask.

"It's a nice fraction of everything," he says.

Janice, who is soft-spoken and black, speaks about the overcrowding of the school. "I make it my business," she says, "to know my fellow students. But it isn't easy when the classes are so large. I had 45 children in my fifth grade class. The teacher sometimes didn't know you. She would ask you, 'What's your name?'"

"You *want* the teacher to know your name," says Rosie, who is Puerto Rican. "The teacher asks me, 'Are you really in this class?' 'Yes, I've been here all semester.' But she doesn't know my name."

All the students hope to go to college. After college they

have ambitious plans. One of them hopes to be a doctor. Two want to be lawyers. Alexander wants to be an architect. Carissa hopes to be a businesswoman. What is the likelihood that they will live up to these dreams? Five years ago, I'm told, there were approximately 500 freshman students in the school. Of these, only 180 survived four grades and made it through twelfth grade to graduation; only 82 were skilled enough to take the SATs. The projection I have heard for this year's ninth grade class is that 150 or so may graduate four years from now. Which of the kids before me will survive?

Rosie speaks of sixth grade classmates who had babies and left school. Victor speaks of boys who left school during eighth grade. Only one of the children in this group has ever been a student in a racially desegregated school.

"How long will it be," I ask, "before white children and black and Hispanic children in New York will go to the same schools?"

"How long has the United States existed?" Alexander asks.

Janice says, "Two hundred years."

"Give it another two hundred years," says Alexander.

"Thank you," says Carissa.

At the end of school, Jack Forman takes me down to see the ground-floor auditorium. The room resembles an Elizabethan theater. Above the proscenium arch there is a mural, circa 1910, that must have been impressive long ago. The ceiling is crossed by wooden ribs; there are stained-glass windows in the back. But it is all in ruins. Two thirds of the stained-glass panes are missing and replaced by Plexiglas. Next to each of eight tall windows is a huge black number scrawled across the wall by a contractor who began but never finished the repairs. Chunks of wall and sections of the arches and supporting pillars have been blasted out by rot. Lights are falling from the ceiling. Chunks of plaster also hang from underneath the balcony above my head. The floor is filled with lumber, broken and upended desks, potato-chip bags, Styrofoam coffee cups and other trash. There is a bank of organ pipes, gold-colored within a frame of dark-stained wood, but there is no organ. Spilled on the

floor beside my feet are several boxes that contain a "Regents Action Plan" for New York City's schools. Scattered across the floor amid the trash: "English Instructional Worksheets: 1984."

"Think what we could do with this," says Forman. "This kind of room was meant for theater and to hold commencements. Parents could enter directly from outside. The mural above the proscenium arch could be restored.

"This could be the soul of the school," he says. "Hopefully, three years from now, when Victor is a senior, we will have this auditorium restored. That's my dream: to see him stand and graduate beneath this arch, his parents out there under the stained glass."

From my notes: "Morris High could be a wonderful place, a centerpiece of education, theater, music, every kind of richness for poor children. The teachers I've met are good and energized. They seem to love the children, and the kids deserve it. The building mocks their goodness."

Like Chicago, New York City has a number of selective high schools that have special programs and impressive up-to-date facilities. Schools like Morris High, in contrast, says the *New York Times*, tend to be "most overcrowded" and have "the highest dropout rates" and "lowest scores." In addition, we read, they receive "less money" per pupil.

The selective schools, according to the *Times*, "compete for the brightest students, but some students who might qualify lose out for lack of information and counseling." Other families, says the paper, "win admission through political influence."

The *Times* writes that these better-funded schools should not be "the preserve of an unfairly chosen elite." Yet, if the experience of other cities holds in New York City, this is what these special schools are meant to be. They are *intended* to be enclaves of superior education, private schools essentially, within the public system.

New York City's selective admissions program, says the principal of nonselective Jackson High, "has had the effect of making Jackson a racially segregated high school. . . . Simultaneously, the most 'difficult' and 'challenging' black stu-

dents [have been] *encouraged* to select Jackson. . . ." The plan, she says, has had the effect of "placing a disproportionate number" of nonachieving children in one school. Moreover, she observes, students who do not meet "acceptable standards" in their chosen schools are sent back to schools like Jackson, making it effectively a dumping ground for children who are unsuccessful elsewhere.

"The gerrymandered zoning and the high school selection processes," according to a resident of the Jackson district, "create a citywide skimming policy that we compare to orange juice—our black youngsters are being treated like the sediment." The city, she says, is "not shaking the juice right." But she may be wrong. In the minds of those who have their eyes on an effective triage process—selective betterment of the most fortunate—this may be exactly the right way to shake the juice.

Unfairness on this scale is hard to contemplate in any setting. In the case of New York City and particularly Riverdale, however, it takes on a special poignance. Riverdale, after all, is not a redneck neighborhood. It has been home for many years to some of the most progressive people in the nation. Dozens of college students from this neighborhood went south during the civil rights campaigns to fight for the desegregation of the schools and restaurants and stores. The parents of those students often made large contributions to support the work of SNCC and CORE. One generation passes, and the cruelties they fought in Mississippi have come north to New York City. Suddenly, no doubt unwittingly, they find themselves opposed to simple things they would have died for 20 years before. Perhaps it isn't fair to say they are "opposed." A better word, more accurate, might be "oblivious." They do not want poor children to be harmed. They simply want the best for their own children. To the children of the South Bronx, it is all the same.

The system of selective schools in New York City has its passionate defenders. There are those who argue that these schools *deserve* the preferential treatment they receive in fiscal areas and faculty assignment because of the remarkable

success that they have had with those whom they enroll. One such argument is made by the sociologist and writer Nathan Glazer.

Noting that excellent math and science teachers are in short supply in New York City, Glazer asks, "If they are scarce, is their effectiveness maximized by scattering them" to serve all children "or by their concentration" so that they can serve the high-achieving? "I think there is a good argument to be made that their effectiveness is maximized by concentration. They, like their students, have peers to talk to and work with and to motivate them." While recognizing the potential for inequity, Glazer nonetheless goes on, "I would argue that nowhere do we get so much for so little . . . than where we bring together the gifted and competent. They teach each other. They create an institution which provides them with an advantageous . . . label."

The points that Glazer makes here seem persuasive, though I think he contemplates too comfortably the virtually inevitable fact that "concentration" of the better teachers in the schools that serve the "high-achieving" necessarily requires a dilution of such teachers in the schools that serve the poorest children. While disagreeing with him on the fairness of this policy, I am not in disagreement on the question of the value of selective schools and am not proposing that such schools should simply not exist. Certain of these schools —New York's Bronx High School of Science, for instance, Boston's Latin School, and others—have distinguished histories and have made important contributions to American society.

If there were a multitude of schools *almost* as good as these in every city, so that applicants for high school could select from dozens of good options—so that even parents who did not have the sophistication or connections to assist their children in obtaining entrance to selective schools would not see their kids attending truly *bad* schools, since there would be none—then it would do little harm if certain of these schools were even better than the rest. In such a situation, kids who couldn't be admitted to a famous school such as Bronx Science might be jealous of the ones who did

get in, but would not, for this reason, be condemned to third-rate education and would not be written off by the society.

But that is not the situation that exists. In the present situation, which is less a field of education options than a battlefield on which a class and racial war is being acted out, the better schools function, effectively, as siphons which draw off not only the most high-achieving and the best-connected students but their parents too; and this, in turn, leads to a rather cruel, if easily predictable, scenario: Once these students win admission to the places where, in Glazer's words, the "competent" and "gifted" "teach each other" and win "advantageous" labels, there is no incentive for their parents to be vocal on the issues that concern the students who have been excluded. Having obtained what they desired, they secede, to a degree, from the political arena. The political effectiveness of those who have been left behind is thus depleted. Soon enough, the failure of their children and the chaos, overcrowding and low funding of the schools that they attend confirm the wisdom of those families who have fled to the selective schools. This is, of course, exactly what a private school makes possible; but public schools in a democracy should not be allowed to fill this role.

A 16-year-old student in the South Bronx tells me that he went to English class for two months in the fall of 1989 before the school supplied him with a textbook. He spent the entire year without a science text. "My mother offered to help me with my science, which was hard for me," he says, "but I could not bring home a book."

In May of 1990 he is facing final exams, but, because the school requires students to pass in their textbooks one week prior to the end of the semester, he is forced to study without math and English texts.

He wants to go to college and he knows that math and English are important, but he's feeling overwhelmed, especially in math. He asked his teacher if he could come in for extra help, but she informed him that she didn't have the time. He asked if he could come to school an hour early,

when she might have time to help him, but security precautions at the school made this impossible.

Sitting in his kitchen, I attempt to help him with his math and English. In math, according to a practice test he has been given, he is asked to solve the following equation: "$2x - 2 = 14$. What is x?" He finds this baffling. In English, he is told he'll have to know the parts of speech. In the sentence "Jack walks to the store," he is unable to identify the verb.

He is in a dark mood, worried about this and other problems. His mother has recently been diagnosed as having cancer. We leave the apartment and walk downstairs to the street. He's a full-grown young man, tall and quiet and strong-looking; but out on the street, when it is time to say good-bye, his eyes fill up with tears.

In the fall of the year, he phones me at my home. "There are 42 students in my science class, 40 in my English class—45 in my home room. When all the kids show up, five of us have to stand in back."

A first-year English teacher at another high school in the Bronx calls me two nights later: "I've got five classes—42 in each! We have no textbooks yet. I'm using my old textbook from the seventh grade. They're doing construction all around me so the noise is quite amazing. They're actually *drilling* in the hall outside my room. I have more kids than desks in all five classes.

"A student came in today whom I had never seen. I said, 'We'll have to wait and see if someone doesn't come so you can have a chair.' She looked at me and said, 'I'm leaving.' "

The other teachers tell her that the problem will resolve itself. "Half the students will be gone by Christmastime, they say. It's awful when you realize that the school is *counting* on the failure of one half my class. If they didn't count on it, perhaps it wouldn't happen. If I *began* with 20 students in a class, I'd have lots more time to spend with each of them. I'd have a chance to track them down, go to their homes, see them on the weekends. . . . I don't understand why people in New York permit this."

One of the students in her class, she says, wrote this two-line poem for Martin Luther King:

He tried to help the white and black.
Now that he's dead he can't do jack.

Another student wrote these lines:

America the beautiful,
Who are you beautiful for?

"Frequently," says a teacher at another crowded high school in New York, "a student may be in the wrong class for a term and never know it." With only one counselor to 700 students system-wide in New York City, there is little help available to those who feel confused. It is not surprising, says the teacher, "that many find the experience so cold, impersonal and disheartening that they decide to stay home by the sad warmth of the TV set."

According to a recent study issued by the State Commissioner of Education, "as many as three out of four blacks" in New York City "and four out of five Latinos fail to complete high school within the traditional four-year period." The number of students of all races who drop out between ninth and twelfth grades, and do not return, and never finish school, remains a mystery in New York City. The *Times* itself, at various points, has offered estimates that range from 25 percent to nearly twice that high—a range of numbers that suggests how inconsistent and perplexing school board estimates appear even to seasoned journalists. Sara Rimer of the *New York Times* pegged the rate of those who do not graduate at 46 percent in 1990—a figure that seems credible because it is consistent with the numbers for most other cities with large nonwhite student populations. Including those who drop out during junior high—numbers not included in the dropout figures offered by the New York City Board of Education—it may be that roughly half of New York City's children do not finish school.

The school board goes to great extremes to understate these numbers, and now and then the press explains why numbers coming from the central office are not necessarily to be believed. Number-juggling by school boards—for ex-

ample, by devising "a new formula" of calculation to appease the public by appearing to show progress—is familiar all over the nation. The *Times,* for instance, notes in another article that, while the "official" dropout rate "has fallen from 45 percent to 29.2 percent," watchdog groups say that the alleged "improvement" stems from "changes in the way the number has been calculated." School boards, moreover, have a vested interest in low-balling dropout figures since the federal and state aid that they receive is pegged to actual attendance.

Listening to children who drop out of school, we often hear an awful note of anonymity. "I hated the school. . . . I never knew who my counselor was," a former New York City student says. "He wasn't available for me. . . . I saw him once. . . . One ten-minute interview. . . . That was all."

Chaos and anonymity overtake some of the elementary schools as well. "A child identified as a chronic truant," reports an official of the Rheedlen Foundation, a child welfare agency in New York City, "might be reported by the teacher —or he might not. Someone from the public school attendance office might try to contact the parents and might be successful, or he might not. The child might attend school again. Probably not." Several children of my acquaintance in the New York City schools were truant for eight months in 1988 and 1989 but were never phoned or visited by school attendance officers.

"We have children," says one grade-school principal, "who just disappear from the face of the earth."

This information strikes one as astonishing. How does a child simply "disappear" in New York City? Efficiency in information transfer—when it comes to stock transactions, for example—is one of the city's best-developed skills. Why is it so difficult to keep track of poor children? When the school board loses track of hundreds of poor children, the explanations given by the city point to "managerial dilemmas" and to "problems" in a new computer system. The same dilemmas are advanced as explanations for the city's inability to get books into classrooms in sufficient numbers for the class enrollments, or to paint the walls or keep the roofs from leaking. But managerial dilemmas never quite suffice to jus-

tify these failures. A city which is home to some of the most clever and aggressive and ingenious men and women in the world surely could devise more orderly and less humiliating ways to meet the needs of these poor children. Failure to do so rests in explanations other than a flawed administration, but the city and, particularly, its press appear to favor the administrative explanation. It defuses anger at injustice and replaces it with irritation at bureaucracy.

New York City manages expertly, and with marvelous predictability, whatever it considers humanly important. Fax machines, computers, automated telephones and even messengers on bikes convey a million bits of data through Manhattan every day to guarantee that Wall Street brokers get their orders placed, confirmed, delivered, at the moment they demand. But leaking roofs cannot be fixed and books cannot be gotten into Morris High in time to meet the fall enrollment. Efficiency in educational provision for low-income children, as in health care and most other elementals of existence, is secreted and doled out by our municipalities as if it were a scarce resource. Like kindness, cleanliness and promptness of provision, it is not secured by gravity of need but by the cash, skin color and class status of the applicant.

At a high school in Crown Heights, a neighborhood of Brooklyn, "bathrooms, gymnasiums, hallways and closets" have been converted into classrooms, says the *New York Times*. "We have no closets—they're classrooms now," says the principal of another school. "We went to a school," says Robert Wagner, former president of the city's Board of Education, "where there were five Haitian youngsters literally [having classes] in a urinal."

At P.S. 94 in District 10, where 1,300 children study in a building suitable for 700, the gym has been transformed into four noisy, makeshift classrooms. The gym teacher improvises with no gym. A reading teacher, in whose room "huge pieces of a ceiling" have collapsed, according to the *Times*, "covering the floor, the desks and the books," describes the rain that spills in through the roof. "If society gave a damn about these children," says the teacher, "they wouldn't let this happen." These are the same conditions I

observed in Boston's segregated schools a quarter-century ago. Nothing has changed.

A class of third grade children at the school has four different teachers in a five-month span in 1989. "We get dizzy," says one child in the class. The only social worker in the school has 30 minutes in a week to help a troubled child. Her caseload holds the names of nearly 80 children. The only truant officer available, who splits her time between this and three other schools in District 10—the district has ten truant officers, in all, for 36,000 children—is responsible for finding and retrieving no less than 400 children at a given time.

When a school board hires just *one* woman to retrieve 400 missing children from the streets of the North Bronx, we may reasonably conclude that it does not particularly desire to find them. If 100 of these children startled us by showing up at school, moreover, there would be no room for them in P.S. 94. The building couldn't hold them.

Many of these problems, says the press again, may be attributed to inefficiency and certain very special bureaucratic difficulties in the New York City system. As we have seen, however, comparable problems are apparent in Chicago, and the same conditions are routinely found in other systems serving mainly nonwhite children. The systems and bureaucracies are different. What is consistent is that all of them are serving children who are viewed as having little value to America.

One way of establishing the value we attribute to a given group of children is to look at the medical provision that we make for them. The usual indices of school investment and performance—class size, teacher salaries and test results—are at best imperfect tools of measurement; but infant survival rates are absolute.

In Central Harlem, notes the *New York Times*, the infant death rate is the same as in Malaysia. Among black children in East Harlem, it is even higher: 42 per thousand, which would be considered high in many Third World nations. "A child's chance of surviving to age five," notes New Jersey

Senator Bill Bradley, "are better in Bangladesh than in East Harlem." In the South Bronx, says the author of a recent study by the nonprofit United Hospital Fund of New York City, 531 infants out of 1,000 require neonatal hospitalization—a remarkable statistic that portends high rates of retardation and brain damage. In Riverdale, by contrast, only 69 infants in 1,000 call for such attention.

What is promised these poor children and their parents, says Professor Eli Ginzberg of Columbia University, is "an essential level" of care as "distinct from optimal." Equity, he states, is "out of the question." In a similar way, the *New York Times* observes, a lower quality of education for poor children in New York, as elsewhere in America, is "accepted as a fact." Inequality, whether in hospitals or schools, is simply not contested. Any suggestion that poor people in New York will get the same good health care as the rich or middle class, says Dr. Ginzberg, is "inherently nonsensical."

The *New York Times* describes some public hospitals in which there is "no working microscope" to study sputum samples, no gauze or syringes "to collect blood samples." A couple of years ago, says a physician at the city's Bellevue Hospital, "we were running out of sutures in the operating room." Two years before, Harlem Hospital ran out of penicillin.

"Out-and-out racism, which in our city and our society is institutionalized," said David Dinkins in 1987, a year before he was elected mayor, "has allowed this to go on for years."

But the racial explanation is aggressively rejected by the medical establishment. The *Journal of the American Medical Association*, for example, seeking to explain the differences in care provided to the white and nonwhite, speculates that "cultural differences" in patients' attitudes toward modern care may be involved. White people, says the *Journal*, "may prefer a more technological approach. . . ."

A doctor at Cook County Hospital in Chicago has another explanation. "I think," he says, "there's a different subjective response on the part of doctors. . . ." And, in explanation of the fact that white patients in cardiac care are two to three times as likely as black patients to be given by-

pass surgery, he wonders whether white physicians may be "less inclined to invest in a black patient's heart" than in the heart of a "white, middle-class executive" because the future economic value of the white man, who is far more likely to return to a productive job, is often so much higher. Investment strategies in education, as we've seen, are often framed in the same terms: "How much is it worth investing in *this* child as opposed to *that* one? Where will we see the best return?" Although respectable newspapers rarely pose the question in these chilling terms, it is clear that certain choices have been made: Who shall be educated? Who shall live? Who is likely to return the most to our society?

A doctor who has worked for many years in the South Bronx notes that views like these are masked by our apparently benevolent attempts to rectify the damage that we have permitted: "Once these babies, damaged by denial of sufficient health care for their mothers, have been born impaired, we hook them up to tubes and place them on a heated table in an isolette and do our very best to save their lives. It seems that we do not want them to die. Much is made in press reports of our provision for these infants; it may even be that we are prone to praise ourselves for these expensive efforts. But, like the often costly salvage programs of teen-age remediation for the children we have first denied the opportunity for health care, then for preschool, then for equal education, these special wards for damaged infants are provisions of obligatory mercy which are needed only as a consequence of our refusal to provide initial justice."

Health officials sometimes fend off criticism of this nature by assuring us that better facilities or more elaborate surgical procedures offered to rich patients do not necessarily pay off in every case, just as we are often told that higher funding for the schools attended by more affluent children does not necessarily imply superior education. What may be at stake among the wealthy, says the AMA, is "overutilization."

Overutilization is a fact of life in modern medicine—and it raises costs for all prospective patients over the long run—but one feels a troubling uneasiness about the way in which this argument is introduced. "It is," says the doctor I

have cited, "an intriguing explanation. Perhaps, these people seem to say, the point is not that blacks receive too little but that whites receive too much. The second point may be correct, but there is something that I find insidious about the way this point is used. You could also argue, I suppose, that children at expensive high schools do not really profit from their access to so many books, so many foreign languages, so many high-paid teachers, and may even suffer from exposure to so many guidance counselors. We have the right to raise our eyebrows, nonetheless, when 'overutilization' by the very rich has been permitted to continue at the very time that we are told to question whether it much matters. If it doesn't matter, cancel it for everybody. Don't give to them, deny it to us, then ask us to believe that it is not significant."

One consequence of medical and early educational denial is the virtual destruction of the learning skills of many children by the time they get to secondary school. Knowing one is ruined is a powerful incentive to destroy the learning opportunities for other children, and the consequence in many schools is nearly uncontrollable disruption.

Two years ago, in order to meet this and other problems, New York City's Office of School Safety started buying handcuffs. Some 2,300 pairs were purchased for a system that contains almost 1,000 schools: an average of two pairs of handcuffs for each school. "It is no doubt possible," the weekly *New York Observer* editorializes, "to obtain improvements in discipline and even in test scores and dropout rates" by "turning schools into disciplinary barracks." But the paper questions whether such a regimen is ideal preparation for life in a democratic nation.

Handcuffs, however, may be better preparation than we realize for the lives that many of these adolescent kids will lead. According to the New York City Department of Corrections, 90 percent of the male inmates of the city's prisons are the former dropouts of the city's public schools. Incarceration of each inmate, the department notes, costs the city nearly $60,000 every year.

Handcuffs draw the attention of the press because they are a graphic symbol of so many other problems. But far

more damaging, I am convinced, are the more subtle manacles of racial patterns in assignment and school tracking. Few things can injure a child more, or do more damage to the child's self-esteem, than to be locked into a bottom-level track as early as the first or second grade. Add to this the squalor of the setting and the ever-present message of a child's racial isolation, and we have in place an almost perfect instrument to guarantee that we will need more handcuffs and, no doubt, more prisons.

The slotting of black children into lower tracks, according to the Public Education Association of New York, is a familiar practice in the city: "Classes for the emotionally handicapped, neurologically impaired, learning disabled and educable mentally retarded are disproportionately black. . . . Classes for the speech, language, and hearing impaired are disproportionately Hispanic." Citywide, the association adds, fewer than 10 percent of children slotted in these special tracks will graduate from school. Nationwide, black children are three times as likely as white children to be placed in classes for the mentally retarded but only half as likely to be placed in classes for the gifted: a well-known statistic that should long since have aroused a sense of utter shame in our society. Most shameful is the fact that no such outrage can be stirred in New York City.

This is the case with almost every aspect of the degradation of poor children in New York. Even the most thorough exposition of the facts within the major organs of the press is neutralized too frequently by context and a predilection for the type of grayish language that denies the possibilities for indignation. Facts are cited. Editorials are written. Five years later, the same facts are cited once again. There is no sense of moral urgency; and nothing changes.

The differences between school districts and *within* school districts in the city are, however, almost insignificant compared to those between the city and the world of affluence around it—in Westchester County, for example, and in largely prosperous Long Island.

Even in the suburbs, nonetheless, it has been noted that a differential system still exists, and it may not be surprising

to discover that the differences are once again determined by the social class, parental wealth, and sometimes race, of the schoolchildren. A study, a few years ago, of 20 of the wealthiest and poorest districts of Long Island, for example, matched by location and size of enrollment, found that the differences in per-pupil spending were not only large but had approximately doubled in a five-year period. Schools, in Great Neck, in 1987, spent $11,265 for each pupil. In affluent Jericho and Manhasset the figures were, respectively, $11,325 and $11,370. In Oyster Bay the figure was $9,980. Compare this to Levittown, also on Long Island but a town of mostly working-class white families, where per-pupil spending dropped to $6,900. Then compare these numbers to the spending level in the town of Roosevelt, the poorest district in the county, where the schools are 99 percent nonwhite and where the figure dropped to $6,340. Finally, consider New York City, where, in the same year, $5,590 was invested in each pupil—less than half of what was spent in Great Neck. The pattern is almost identical to that which we have seen outside Chicago.

Again, look at Westchester County, where, in the same year, the same range of discrepancies was found. Affluent Bronxville, an attractive suburb just north of the Bronx, spent $10,000 for each pupil. Chappaqua's yearly spending figure rose above $9,000. Studying the chart again, we locate Yonkers—a blue-collar town that is predominantly white but where over half the student population is nonwhite—and we find the figure drops to $7,400. This is not the lowest figure, though. The lowest-spending schools within Westchester, spending a full thousand dollars less than Yonkers, serve the suburb of Mount Vernon, where three quarters of the children in the public schools are black.

"If you're looking for a home," a realtor notes, "you can look at the charts for school expenditures and use them to determine if your neighbors will be white and wealthy or, conversely, black or white but poor."

Newsday, a Long Island paper, notes that these comparisons are studied with great interest by home-buyers. Indeed, the paper notes, the state's exhaustive compilation, "Statistical Profiles of Public School Districts," has unexpectedly become a small best-seller. People who want to know if public schools in areas where they are planning to buy homes are actually as good as it is claimed in real-estate brochures, according to *Newsday*, now can use the "Statistical Profiles" as a more authoritative source. Superintendents in some districts say the publication, which compares student performance, spending, staff and such in every state school system, "will be useful for home-buyers." For real-estate agents in the highest-rated districts, the appearance of this publication is good news. It helps to elevate the value of the homes they have for sale.

In effect, a circular phenomenon evolves: The richer districts—those in which the property lots and houses are more highly valued—have more revenue, derived from taxing land and homes, to fund their public schools. The reputation of the schools, in turn, adds to the value of their homes, and this, in turn, expands the tax base for their public schools. The fact that they can levy lower taxes than the poorer districts, but exact more money, raises values even more; and this, again, means further funds for smaller classes and for higher teacher salaries within their public schools. Few of the children in the schools of Roosevelt or Mount Vernon will, as a result, be likely to compete effectively with kids in Great Neck and Manhasset for admissions to the better local colleges and universities of New York state. Even fewer will compete for more exclusive Ivy League admissions. And few of the graduates or dropouts of those poorer systems, as a consequence, are likely ever to earn enough to buy a home in Great Neck or Manhasset.

The New York State Commissioner of Education cautions parents not to make "the judgment that a district is good because the scores are good, or bad because the scores are bad." This, we will find, is a recurrent theme in public statements on this issue, and the commissioner is correct, of course, that overemphasis on test scores, when the differences are slight, can be deceptive. But it may be somewhat disingenuous to act as if the larger differences do not effectively predict success or failure for large numbers of schoolchildren. Certainly home-buyers will be easily convinced that schools in Jericho, third-highest-spending district on Long

Island, where the dropout rate is an astonishing and enviable "zero" and where all but 3 percent of seniors go to college, are likely to be "good" compared to those of New York City, which spends only half as much per pupil and where only half the students ever graduate.

An apparent obligation of officials in these situations is to shelter the recipients of privilege from the potential wrath of those who are less favored. Officials manage, in effect, to broadcast a dual message. To their friends they say, in private, "This is the best place to buy a home. These are the best schools. These are the hospitals. These are the physicians." For the record, however, they assure the public that these numbers must not be regarded as implying any drastic differentials.

"The question," says the New York State Commissioner, is not how good the test scores look, but "how well is the district doing by the children it enrolls?" This will bring to mind the statement of New Trier High School's former head of student services. ("This school is right," he said, "for this community." It wouldn't, however, be "right" for everyone.) It does not require much political sophistication to decode these statements—no more than it requires to discern what is at stake when scholars at conservative foundations tell us that black children and white children may have "different learning styles" and require "different strategies" and maybe "different schools."

The commissioner's question—"How well is the district doing by the children it enrolls?"—sounds reasonable. But the answers that are given to that question, as we know, will be determined by class expectations. The schools of the South Bronx—not many, but a few at least—are "doing well" by future typists, auto mechanics, office clerks and factory employees. The schools of Great Neck are "doing well" by those who will someday employ them.

There is a certain grim aesthetic in the almost perfect upward scaling of expenditures from poorest of the poor to richest of the rich within the New York City area: $5,590 for the children of the Bronx and Harlem, $6,340 for the non-white kids of Roosevelt, $6,400 for the black kids of Mount Vernon, $7,400 for the slightly better-off community of

Yonkers, over $11,000 for the very lucky children of Manhasset, Jericho and Great Neck. In an ethical society, where money was apportioned in accord with need, these scalings would run almost in precise reverse.

The point is often made that, even with a genuine equality of schooling for poor children, other forces still would militate against their school performance. Cultural and economic factors and the flight of middle-income blacks from inner cities still would have their consequences in the heightened concentration of the poorest children in the poorest neighborhoods. Teen-age pregnancy, drug use and other problems still would render many families in these neighborhoods all but dysfunctional. Nothing I have said within this book should leave the misimpression that I do not think these factors are enormously important. A polarization of this issue, whereby some insist upon the primacy of school, others upon the primacy of family and neighborhood, obscures the fact that both are elemental forces in the lives of children.

The family, however, differs from the school in the significant respect that government is not responsible, or at least not directly, for the inequalities of family background. It *is* responsible for inequalities in public education. The school is the creature of the state; the family is not. To the degree, moreover, that destructive family situations may be bettered by the future acts of government, no one expects that this could happen in the years immediately ahead. Schools, on the other hand, could make dramatic changes almost overnight if fiscal equity were a reality.

If the New York City schools were funded, for example, at the level of the highest-spending suburbs of Long Island, a fourth grade class of 36 children such as those I visited in District 10 would have had *$200,000 more* invested in their education during 1987. Although a portion of this extra money would have gone into administrative costs, the remainder would have been enough to hire two extraordinary teachers at enticing salaries of $50,000 each, divide the class into *two classes* of some 18 children each, provide them with computers, carpets, air conditioning, new texts and refer-

ence books and learning games—indeed, with everything available today in the most affluent school districts—and also pay the costs of extra counseling to help those children cope with the dilemmas that they face at home. Even the most skeptical detractor of "the worth of spending further money in the public schools" would hesitate, I think, to face a grade-school principal in the South Bronx and try to tell her that this "wouldn't make much difference."

It is obvious that urban schools have other problems in addition to their insufficient funding. Administrative chaos is endemic in some urban systems. (The fact that this in itself is a reflection of our low regard for children who depend upon these systems is a separate matter.) Greater funding, if it were intelligently applied, could partially correct these problems—by making possible, for instance, the employment of some very gifted, high-paid fiscal managers who could assure that money is well used—but it probably is also true that major structural reforms would still be needed. To polarize these points, however, and to argue, as the White House has been claiming for a decade, that administrative changes are a "better" answer to the problem than equality of funding and real efforts at desegregation is dishonest and simplistic. The suburbs have better administrations (sometimes, but not always), and they also have a lot more money in proportion to their children's needs. To speak of the former and evade the latter is a formula that guarantees that nothing will be done *today* for children who have no responsibility for either problem.

To be in favor of "good families" or of "good administration" does not take much courage or originality. It is hard to think of anyone who is opposed to either. To be in favor of redistribution of resources and of racial integration would require a great deal of courage—and a soaring sense of vision—in a president or any other politician. Whether such courage or such vision will someday become transcendent forces in our nation is by no means clear.

The train ride from Grand Central Station to suburban Rye, New York, takes 35 to 40 minutes. The high school is a short ride from the station. Built of handsome gray stone

and set in a landscaped campus, it resembles a New England prep school. On a day in early June of 1990, I enter the school and am directed by a student to the office.

The principal, a relaxed, unhurried man who, unlike many urban principals, seems gratified to have me visit in his school, takes me in to see the auditorium, which, he says, was recently restored with private charitable funds ($400,000) raised by parents. The crenellated ceiling, which is white and spotless, and the polished dark-wood paneling contrast with the collapsing structure of the auditorium at Morris High. The principal strikes his fist against the balcony: "They made this place extremely solid." Through a window, one can see the spreading branches of a beech tree in the central courtyard of the school.

In a student lounge, a dozen seniors are relaxing on a carpeted floor that is constructed with a number of tiers so that, as the principal explains, "they can stretch out and be comfortable while reading."

The library is wood-paneled, like the auditorium. Students, all of whom are white, are seated at private carrels, of which there are approximately 40. Some are doing homework; others are looking through the *New York Times*. Every student that I see during my visit to the school is white or Asian, though I later learn there are a number of Hispanic students and that 1 or 2 percent of students in the school are black.

According to the principal, the school has 96 computers for 546 children. The typical student, he says, studies a foreign language for four or five years, beginning in the junior high school, and a second foreign language (Latin is available) for two years. Of 140 seniors, 92 are now enrolled in AP classes. Maximum teacher salary will soon reach $70,000. Per-pupil funding is above $12,000 at the time I visit.

The students I meet include eleventh and twelfth graders. The teacher tells me that the class is reading Robert Coles, Studs Terkel, Alice Walker. He tells me I will find them more than willing to engage me in debate, and this turns out to be correct. Primed for my visit, it appears, they arrow in directly on the dual questions of equality and race.

Three general positions soon emerge and seem to be

accepted widely. The first is that the fiscal inequalities "do matter very much" in shaping what a school can offer ("That is obvious," one student says) and that any loss of funds in Rye, as a potential consequence of future equalizing, would be damaging to many things the town regards as quite essential.

The second position is that racial integration—for example, by the busing of black children from the city or a nonwhite suburb to this school—would meet with strong resistance, and the reason would not simply be the fear that certain standards might decline. The reason, several students say straightforwardly, is "racial" or, as others say it, "out-and-out racism" on the part of adults.

The third position voiced by many students, but not all, is that equity is basically a goal to be desired and should be pursued for moral reasons, but "will probably make no major difference" since poor children "still would lack the motivation" and "would probably fail in any case because of other problems."

At this point, I ask if they can truly say "it wouldn't make a difference" since it's never been attempted. Several students then seem to rethink their views and say that "it might work, but it would have to start with preschool and the elementary grades" and "it might be 20 years before we'd see a difference."

At this stage in the discussion, several students speak with some real feeling of the present inequalities, which, they say, are "obviously unfair," and one student goes a little further and proposes that "we need to change a lot more than the schools." Another says she'd favor racial integration "by whatever means—including busing—even if my parents disapprove." But a contradictory opinion also is expressed with a good deal of fervor and is stated by one student in a rather biting voice: "I don't see why we should do it. How could it be of benefit to us?"

Throughout the discussion, whatever the views the children voice, there is a degree of unreality about the whole exchange. The children are lucid and their language is well chosen and their arguments well made, but there is a sense that they are dealing with an issue that does not feel very vivid, and that nothing that we say about it to each other

really matters since it's "just a theoretical discussion." To a certain degree, the skillfulness and cleverness that they display seem to derive precisely from this sense of unreality. Questions of unfairness feel more like a geometric problem than a matter of humanity or conscience. A few of the students do break through the note of unreality, but, when they do, they cease to be so agile in their use of words and speak more awkwardly. Ethical challenges seem to threaten their effectiveness. There is the sense that they were skating over ice and that the issues we addressed were safely frozen underneath. When they stop to look beneath the ice they start to stumble. The verbal competence they have acquired here may have been gained by building walls around some regions of the heart.

"I don't think that busing students from their ghetto to a different school would do much good," one student says. "You can take them out of the environment, but you can't take the environment out of *them*. If someone grows up in the South Bronx, he's not going to be prone to learn." His name is Max and he has short black hair and speaks with confidence. "Busing didn't work when it was tried," he says. I ask him how he knows this and he says he saw a television movie about Boston.

"I agree that it's unfair the way it is," another student says. "We have AP courses and they don't. Our classes are much smaller." But, she says, "putting them in schools like ours is not the answer. Why not put some AP classes into *their* school? Fix the roof and paint the halls so it will not be so depressing."

The students know the term "separate but equal," but seem unaware of its historical associations. "Keep them where they are but make it equal," says a girl in the front row.

A student named Jennifer, whose manner of speech is somewhat less refined and polished than that of the others, tells me that her parents came here from New York. "My family is originally from the Bronx. Schools are hell there. That's one reason that we moved. I don't think it's our responsibility to pay our taxes to provide for *them*. I mean, my parents used to live there and they wanted to get out. There's

no point in coming to a place like this, where schools are good, and then your taxes go back to the place where you began."

I bait her a bit: "Do you mean that, now that you are not in hell, you have no feeling for the people that you left behind?"

"It has to be the people in the area who want an education. If your parents just don't care, it won't do any good to spend a lot of money. Someone else can't want a good life for you. You have got to want it for yourself." Then she adds, however, "I agree that everyone should have a chance at taking the same courses. . . ."

I ask her if she'd think it fair to pay more taxes so that this was possible.

"I don't see how that benefits me," she says.

It occurs to me how hard it would have been for anyone to make that kind of statement, even in the wealthiest suburban school, in 1968. Her classmates would have been unsettled by the voicing of such undisguised self-interest. Here in Rye, in 1990, she can say this with impunity. She's an interesting girl and I reluctantly admire her for being so straightforward.

Max raises a different point. "I'm not convinced," he says, "that AP courses would be valued in the Bronx. Not everyone is going to go to college."

Jennifer picks up on this and carries it a little further. "The point," she says, "is that you cannot give an equal chance to every single person. If you did it, you'd be changing the whole economic system. Let's be honest. If you equalize the money, someone's got to be shortchanged. I don't doubt that children in the Bronx are getting a bad deal. But do we want *everyone* to get a mediocre education?"

"The other point," says Max, "is that you need to match the money that you spend to whether children in the school can profit from it. We get twice as much as kids in the South Bronx, but our school is *more* than twice as good and that's because of who is here. Money isn't the whole story. . . ."

"In New York," says Jennifer, "rich people put their kids in private school. If we equalize between New York and Rye, you would see the same thing happen here. People would

pull out their kids. Some people do it now. So it would happen a lot more."

An eleventh grader shakes her head at this. "Poor children need more money. It's as simple as that," she says. "Money comes from taxes. If we have it, we should pay it."

It is at this point that a boy named David picks up on a statement made before. "Someone said just now that this is not our obligation, our responsibility. I don't think that that's the question. I don't think you'd do it, pay more taxes or whatever, out of obligation. You would do it just because . . . it is unfair the way it is." He falters on these words and looks a bit embarrassed. Unlike many of the other students who have spoken, he is somewhat hesitant and seems to choke up on his words. "Well, it's easy for me to be sitting here and say I'd spend my parents' money. I'm not working. I don't earn the money. I don't need to be conservative until I do. I can be as open-minded and unrealistic as I want to be. You can be a liberal until you have a mortgage."

I ask him what he'd likely say if he were ten years older. "Hopefully," he says, "my values would remain the same. But I know that having money does affect you. This, at least, is what they tell me."

Spurred perhaps by David's words, another student says, "The biggest tax that people pay is to the federal government. Why not take some money from the budget that we spend on armaments and use it for the children in these urban schools?"

A well-dressed student with a healthy tan, however, says that using federal taxes for the poor "would be like giving charity," and "charitable things have never worked. . . . Charity will not instill the poor with self-respect."

Max returns to something that he said before: "The environment is everything. It's going to take something more than money." He goes on to speak of inefficiency and of alleged corruption in the New York City schools. "Some years ago the chancellor was caught in borrowing $100,000 from the schools. I am told that he did not intend to pay it back. These things happen too much in New York. Why should we pour money in, when they are wasting what they have?"

I ask him, "Have we *any* obligations to poor people?"

"I don't think the burden is on us," says Jennifer again. "Taxing the rich to help the poor—we'd be getting nothing out of it. I don't understand how it would make a better educational experience for me."

"A child's in school only six hours in a day," says Max. "You've got to deal with what is happening at home. If his father's in the streets, his mother's using crack . . . how is money going to make a difference?"

David dismisses this and tells me, "Here's what we should do. Put more money into preschool, kindergarten, elementary years. Pay college kids to tutor inner-city children. Get rid of the property tax, which is too uneven, and use income taxes to support these schools. Pay teachers more to work in places like the Bronx. It has to come from taxes. Pay them extra to go into the worst schools. You could forgive their college loans to make it worth their while."

"Give the children Head Start classes," says another student. "If they need more buildings, given them extra money so they wouldn't need to be so crowded."

"It has got to come from taxes," David says again.

"I'm against busing," Max repeats, although this subject hasn't been brought up by anybody else in a long while.

"When people talk this way," says David, "they are saying, actually—" He stops and starts again: "They're saying that black kids will never learn. Even if you spend more in New York. Even if you bring them here to Rye. So what it means is—you are writing people off. You're just dismissing them. . . ."

"I'd like it if we had black students in this school," the girl beside him says.

"It seems rather odd," says David when the hour is up, "that we were sitting in an AP class discussing whether poor kids in the Bronx deserve to get an AP class. We are in a powerful position."

In his earnestness and in his willingness to search his conscience, David reminds me of some of the kids I knew during the civil rights campaigns of the mid-1960s. Standing here beside him and his teacher, it occurs to me that many

students from this town, much like those in Riverdale, were active in those struggles. Hundreds of kids from neighborhoods like these exposed themselves to all the dangers and the violence that waited for young volunteers in rural areas of Mississippi.

Today, after a quarter of a century, black and white children go to the same schools in many parts of Mississippi—the public schools of Mississippi are, in fact, far more desegregated now than public schools in New York City—but the schools are very poor. In 1987, when a child in Great Neck or Manhasset was receiving education costing some $11,000, children in Neshoba County, Mississippi, scene of many of the bloodiest events during the voter registration drives of 23 years before, received some $1,500 for their education. In equally poor Greene County, Mississippi, things got so bad in the winter of 1988 that children enrolled at Sand Hill Elementary School had to bring toilet paper, as well as writing paper, from their homes because, according to the *Jackson Daily News*, "the school has no money for supplies." In the same year, *Time* magazine described conditions in the Mississippi town of Tunica. The roof of a junior high school building in the district had "collapsed" some years before, the magazine reported, but the district had no money for repairs. School desks were "split" and textbooks were "rotting," said *Time*. "Outside, there is no playground equipment."

At Humphreys County High School, in the Mississippi Delta, the science lab has no equipment except a tattered periodic table. "The only air conditioning," says a recent visitor, "is a hole in the roof." In June and September, when the temperature outside can reach 100 degrees, the school is "double hot," according to the principal. Children graduating from the school, he says, have little to look forward to except low-paid employment at a local catfish plant.

Until 1983, Mississippi was one of the few states with no kindergarten program and without compulsory attendance laws. Governor William Winter tried that year to get the legislature to approve a $60-million plan to upgrade public education. The plan included early childhood education, higher teacher salaries, a better math and science program

for the high schools, and compulsory attendance with provisions for enforcement. The state's powerful oil corporations, facing a modest increase in their taxes to support the plan, lobbied vigorously against it. The Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association began a television advertising campaign to defeat the bill, according to a *Newsweek* story.

"The vested interests are just too powerful," a state legislator said. Those interests, according to *Newsweek*, are "unlikely" to rush to the aid of public schools that serve poor children.

It is unlikely that the parents or the kids in Rye or Riverdale know much about realities like these; and, if they do, they may well tell themselves that Mississippi is a distant place and that they have work enough to do to face inequities in New York City. But, in reality, the plight of children in the South Bronx of New York is almost as far from them as that of children in the farthest reaches of the South.

All of these children say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. Whether in the New York suburbs, Mississippi, or the South Bronx, they salute the same flag. They place their hands across their hearts and join their voices in a tribute to "one nation indivisible" which promises liberty and justice to all people. What is the danger that the people in a town like Rye would face if they resolved to make this statement true? How much would it really harm their children to compete in a fair race?

CHAPTER 4

Children of the City Invincible: Camden, New Jersey

"Money," writes the *Wall Street Journal*, "doesn't buy better education. . . . The evidence can scarcely be clearer."

The paper notes that student achievement has been static in the nation while per-pupil spending has increased by $1,800 in five years, after adjusting for inflation. "The investment," says the *Journal*, "hasn't paid off."

What the *Journal* does not add is that per-pupil spending grew at the same rate in the suburbs as it did in urban districts, and quite frequently at faster rates, thereby preventing any catch-up by the urban schools. Then, too, the *Journal* does not tell its readers that the current average figure masks disparities between the schools that spend above $12,000 (Rye, New York, for instance) and the ones that spend less than $3,000. Many of the poorest schools today spend less than the average district spent ten years ago.

"Increasing teachers' salaries doesn't mean better schooling," continues the *Journal*. "More experienced teach-