

ONE

INTRODUCTION

The premise of this book is a simple one: If substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn actually occur in schools, then students' descriptions of their classroom experiences should reflect those changes. Reform, in other words, should become noticeable in what students say about school.

For example, a central feature of most urban education reform initiatives these days is increasing students' sense of belonging at school and, thereby, their commitment to coming to and working at school. It should be heartening, then, to hear a student explain that she was getting a good education in the following way, as one from the study on which this book is based did:

My teacher know how to talk to you, like when you having a problem. Instead of having a temper or nuttin', they just be nice. You can go to them and ask a question. They just don't want to hurry you up and get you out of they class.

Similar comments from a sizeable number of students could lead one to assume that such changes as looping, schools within a school, respect training, and the like had taken hold and woven themselves productively into daily school life.

On the other hand, if after having made those changes and emphasized their importance for several years, educators heard an equal number of students still making statements such as the ones below (again, as our study participants did), then they may want to revisit the strategies they are using to create a feeling of belonging.

My other teacher is always saying: "Didn't you hear me!?"
Didn't you hear me!? I'm not repeating it!"

I think teachers should treat all (students) equal, but they treat some like better. If a kid do something wrong, the teacher treat him like bad and don't care about him; and then will treat another kid like he the world. The teacher like one student better than the other.

The students, of course, may be blithely unaware of intentional investments in planning and training intended to enable their teachers and administrators to act differently and, thus, may gaze blankly at direct inquiries about “the Goals 2000 initiative,” “Success for All,” or, in our case, Philadelphia’s “Children Achieving.” But regardless of students’ familiarity with the particulars of a reform, their accounts of what they and their teachers do in class should serve as indications of whether the reform has penetrated to the classroom level. These indications, while not carrying the political weight of supposed “objective” measures like standardized test scores, should provide a school system with valuable information about whether changes in test scores accurately reflect any substantive changes in teaching and learning.

Acknowledging the merit of this proposition, the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF)—with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts—supported a three-year study of students in five Philadelphia middle schools. (A sixth was added in the last year of the study for reasons detailed later.) The five served some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods and had long histories of poor attendance and low achievement. The research plan was to select a representative cohort of fifty sixth graders from each building to follow through their middle school years. PEF would use the interviews conducted in the spring of each year as one of several contributions to its efforts to supply feedback to the District about its reform progress.

We fully understand that in this age of accountability students’ depictions of their classroom experiences will not be widely accepted as compelling evidence of reform’s impact. The use of standardized test scores as a proxy for school quality has become too common a feature of the educational landscape for us to be so naïve to think otherwise. Still, we would argue, the converse should be true as well. If test scores improve without students noticing much different in school, then people would be justified in regarding the supposed quantified improvement suspiciously.

At the time of this study, the Philadelphia School District’s accountability system portrayed both good and bad news. The good news was that student performance in the high poverty sections of the city was showing

signs of significant gains; the bad news was that this performance remained woefully low when compared to the more well-to-do areas inside and outside Philadelphia's boundaries. The students in our study sided with the less sanguine view of the District's efforts. They recounted far too readily and frequently tales of classrooms in which little, if any, learning occurred.

In the following pages, we share these inner-city students' comments about a host of topics that had direct relevance for the status of Children Achieving, and reform in urban schools in general. In chapter 2, we address the changes students said they had seen during the three years—in their educational plans and experiences, their schools, and their classrooms. The extent of the changes were identified in two ways: (1) having students in the third year reflect on any differences in their experiences that were obvious to them and (2) comparing what students said about their classrooms, teachers, and classmates from one year to the next. On the whole, continuity rather than change was the norm.

Chapter 3 highlights the students' descriptions of the differences in pedagogy, subject content, and learning environment they experienced as they moved from classroom to classroom. The magnitude of within-school variations in these critical aspects of school functioning was the most startling product of the interviews. It was not unusual for a student to move from a classroom exemplifying the best in urban education to one reflecting the worst in the brief span of a five-minute class change-over.

We emphasize in chapter 4 the value of students as constructive education critics. Students vividly portrayed not only the teachers they wanted to avoid if they could but also the ones they desperately wanted to have. That chapter is the heart of this book. It attends to the teacher actions that students reported as best improving the level of their learning—most notably:

- Pushing students to complete assignments
- Maintaining order
- Being willing to offer help whenever and for however long it was needed
- Going to great lengths to explain assignments and concepts
- Varying classroom activities
- Respecting students and their outside-of-the-school worlds

Students seemed to be saying that they most highly valued teachers who refused to allow them to fail and rendered harsh judgment on those who

did not. They recognized that they gave teachers many excuses for giving up on them. The teachers who taught them best did not accept these excuses. In the process, the most valued teachers came across as strict, even annoyingly so, but, as one student argued, they did so because “the whole point of it is to keep you from failing.”

The fifth chapter discusses students’ experiences in a sixth middle school. It troubled us that after the first two years of the study we could detect little that had changed in the five schools. While we had no reason to discount the accuracy of students’ comments, it was possible that either our original premise or our style of talking with students was not suitable for the purpose of using students as windows through which to view a reform’s evolution. Thus, PEF supported fieldwork in another site, one that had already been working closely with a major research and development (R&D) center as one of its pilot demonstration schools. The R&D center sought to create a “strong learning” environment in urban schools through intensive staff development and a challenging curriculum in the core subjects. Available research indicated that the school had implemented certain changes that should have made its educational program markedly different from the ones in the other five schools, even though the school was demographically similar (see, for example, MacIver, Balfanz, & Prioleau, 1999). We felt, therefore, that including eighth graders from this school would give us a better basis for judging the value of using student talk as windows into reform.

Our efforts were rewarded. The students in the school painted a much more balanced and brightly hued portrait of their educational experiences, imbued with greater instructional consistency and more uniform expectations for student performance than we heard about in the other schools. These additional students, thus, not only boosted our confidence in the research strategy, but also lent considerable credence to the suggestions of students in the five schools about how to have a positive impact on learning.

Finally, we reflect on two topics in chapter 6: (1) the implications of the students’ descriptions and insights for educational reform, and (2) the value of using students as sources of feedback on the progress of reform. Ultimately, we conclude that for reform to be successful it has to touch students’ classroom lives **noticeably**—and students are in the best position to let us know that this has occurred.

The remainder of this chapter provides some brief background about the reform context in Philadelphia during the 1995–1998 school years, our rationale for using students’ descriptions as indicators of the

impacts of reform, and an overview of the study and the participating schools.

THE REFORM CONTEXT

Philadelphia seemed to provide an appropriate reform context for using students' comments as windows through which to view reform. Both symbolically (Children Achieving was the umbrella label for a package of changes) and substantively (through committing a major portion of the reform's resources to classroom-focused activities), the District emphasized student behavior and performance as the primary targets of reform. In addition, the initiative had been launched two years prior to the study's beginning and increased in its organizational and political intensity during the three years of the study. Thus, it was entirely reasonable for us to expect that by the end of our study—five years into the reform—we would begin to see classroom-level effects showing up in students' descriptions of what they did each day in school.

According to the District (Philadelphia School District, 1999), through Children Achieving, Philadelphia's administrators, teachers, and staff:

1. "Set high expectations for all children and all schools."
2. "Developed tough, new standards, more effective teaching methods and better ways to hold ourselves accountable."
3. "Found ways to make the system 'feel' smaller and more user-friendly."
4. "Expanded teacher and leadership training dramatically."
5. "Expanded full-day kindergarten programs to every child in Philadelphia."
6. "Broadened and reinforced the safety net for children."
7. "Increased student access to books and computers and build and renovated schools."
8. "Engaged the public as partners in school improvement."
9. "Vigorously pursued more adequate and equitable resources and worked to use them effectively."
10. "Instead of choosing among these strategies to improve our schools, we have pursued all of them at once—and for a sustained period of time."

These ambitious and costly steps hoped to break the decades-long history of student failure in the city.

Philadelphia's then-new superintendent launched Children Achieving in 1993 in an atmosphere charged with cynicism about the prospects of accomplishing much of substance with the District's more than 200,000 students. However, the effort received a much-needed boost from the Annenberg challenge grants. Annenberg invested \$500 million in some of the country's largest and most needy school systems (Cervone, 1998), and Philadelphia was one of the first recipients, matching Annenberg's two-for-one offer of \$50 million with \$100 million from other sources.

This development immediately put the national reform spotlight squarely on urban education. New York City used much of its funding to create small, "excellent schools of choice" (with over 140 having been created by 1999). Chicago, which married an earlier state legislature initiative with the Annenberg challenge, supported small networks of three or more schools and an external partner (such as a community group, nonprofit organization, cultural institution, or university) to improve teaching and learning. Philadelphia initially concentrated these modest resources (by large-city standards) on several clusters composed of a high school and its attendant feeder elementary and middle schools and eventually shifted its focus to the entire district. While reform observers like Shields and Knapp (1997) caution that the most promising systemic reforms tend to have a more modest scope, the District faced overwhelming political and educational pressure to extend Children Achieving to benefit all children. Thus, all six of the schools in which we interviewed students were a part of Children Achieving. However, only the one that partnered with the R&D center received significant resources beyond what most schools in the District got to engage in reform activities.

By 1998, the District reported progress implementing several of the structural and organizational elements of its reform plan. These included the institution of school clusters within the district and small learning communities (SLC) within buildings (Christman, Foley, Passantino, & Mordecai-Phillips, 1998), the development of a system of performance indicators (Luhm, Foley, & Corcoran, 1998), and the establishment of instructional standards (Simon, Passantino, & Foley, 1998)—all three of which were in tune with changes being advocated widely around the country. The District's administration felt that the SLC arrangement facilitated school-based decisionmaking, collegial sharing, and students' sense of belonging. In response to heated criticism of the accountability

measures from both inside and outside the system, the school board commissioned an external review by a panel of educational assessment experts. This panel basically approved of the system, offering only a few minor suggestions for revision. The standards, the District believed, brought coherence to a rambling, patchwork curriculum that had been decades long in the making.

Corresponding gains in students' standardized test scores encouraged the District to continue on its reform path, and, despite perennial funding shortages, in the fall of 1998 the District announced another set of changes directly aimed at improving these student results further. Staying in touch with national trends, the District proposed ending all vestiges of social promotion and raising the standards necessary for students to move on to higher grade levels. Recognizing that increasing expectations without correspondingly enriching the instructional support for inner-city students would be a hollow and futile endeavor, the superintendent stated that more would be demanded of students only if additional funds for professional development, staffing, and curriculum were forthcoming from the Pennsylvania State Department of Education.

Despite this acknowledgment that the District's schools needed more resources to reform successfully, the schools found themselves in a high-stakes accountability environment. Efforts to reconstitute the staff of a couple of low-performing schools engendered impassioned support and resistance. Although reconstitution was rare, its threat continued to hang over the schools whose students had a long history of failure, including the schools in our study.

None of the five middle schools chosen to be in the study originally received resources for reform above and beyond what other schools got. They all immediately reorganized themselves into SLCs, although in most instances this change amounted to re-labeling already existing "houses." Both teachers and principals in each school participated in mandatory staff development geared toward creating instructional environments that promoted learning, jointly devised school improvement plans to serve as their blueprints for change, and girded themselves for the onset of the District's accountability system that was anchored by a heavy dose of standardized testing in the spring of each year.

One could have argued, convincingly and correctly, that the available resources and strategies were too scattered and weak to be expected to have much substantive impact. Children Achieving, however, had the political backing of all the major players in education in Philadelphia, including the teachers, administrators, school board, business com-

munity, and charitable organizations. Thus, the reform had considerable symbolic punch and consequently insinuated itself into adults' discussions about education in Philadelphia. Our goal was to see if the initiative had insinuated itself into students' comments about instruction.

STUDENTS AS USEFUL WINDOWS THROUGH WHICH TO VIEW REFORM

When we discussed the study with teachers in the participating schools, they expressed keen interest and issued nervous chuckles about what we might hear students say. Students, they feared, might avail themselves of this opportunity to offer vigorous and unbalanced complaints about their teachers and schools. The interviews then would become gripe sessions and, worse, lead to yet more public criticism of the District's schools. Despite their inextricable daily physical bond with students, the adults found themselves questioning what students could say that would be relevant to their work. Such a belief apparently is not unusual among teachers (Heshusius, 1995). Still, to their credit, the teachers recognized their concerns as merely hypotheses and were willing for us to have unrestricted access to whichever students became part of the research.

We had had prior experience with listening to students talk about school and were already convinced that their perspectives would be both simply stated and profoundly penetrating (Corbett & Wilson, 1995). A vibrant, though thin, thread of research on students' lives in classrooms burgeoned our confidence. Indeed, long ago, Jackson (1968) established the value to educational thinkers of immersing oneself in the day-to-day life of schools. Seeing what students did and listening to what students had to say about what they did provided bountiful grist for the mill of uncovering, depicting, and critiquing patterns of schooling. However, the primary value of the students' role in such research resided in the increased credence it lent to the researcher's voice in educational thought.

Recent researchers have centered students more directly as articulate and—in their own way—sophisticated observers of school life. For example, Nieto (1994) cogently argued that although some youth, particularly minority adolescents, were alienated from the institution of school and attached no worth to adults' expectations for "good" students, they were yet able to articulate the events, circumstances, and interactions that influenced their construction of this perspective. With such students, enacting higher standards, alternative modes of assessment, or more attractive opportunities to learn would not yield much

success until the root causes of their disaffection found their way to the surface of educational discourse. Adults, therefore, would have to become well-versed in these adolescents' worlds—and how to connect to them—as a prelude to embarking on new designs for how to operate schools.

Poplin and Weeres (1992), in *Voices from the Inside*, described what taking this step looked like in their depictions of the unfolding of a process of discovery in four school communities. As participants wrestled with figuring out the best ways to educate students, they found it productive to engage students in the conversation.

For it is in coming to know that we came to want to act. It is in the listening that we were changed. It is in the hearing our own students speak, as if for the first time, that we came to believe. (1992:19)

To involve students in this way required that the adults recognize them as legitimate participants in educational debate rather than as mere beneficiaries of adults' ministrations, to use Fullan's (1991) distinction. The authors detailed how student input at the improvement table heightened participants' understandings about a range of topics, including relationships, race/culture/class, values, teaching and learning, safety, and the physical environment. Poplin and Weeres concluded that both the quality of and the commitment to the eventual actions taken in the sites benefited immeasurably from students' participation.

Oldfather (1993) and Oldfather and West (1999) reported on a line of research that had students serving as co-researchers in describing the kinds of classroom experiences that motivated them to want to learn to read. The students' conclusions went well beyond mere feedback to their teachers as the teachers turned these perspectives into deliberate actions to promote "meaningful" learning. The students, therefore, became co-constructors of pedagogical practices that helped them learn best, much as Michie's (1999) students did in his self-report of learning to teach in an urban setting. In the process, students became more empowered to take control of their learning and teachers became more effective in facilitating learning.

In *Kids and School Reform*, Wasley, Hampel, and Clark (1997) elevated student voice to the level of schoolwide reform. The authors ventured into schools that were participating in the Coalition of Essential Schools with the expressed purpose of correcting an oversight in reports on the direct effects of reform—students. Through their extended con-

versations over several years, they were able to track how the particular journey each school took specifically affected six individuals. Vignettes about the students succinctly highlighted the features in the schools that eventually promoted the greatest in-school success: connecting established classroom routines with an expanded instructional repertoire; exhibiting caring for individual students and demanding excellence of all of them; balancing a rigorous adherence to standards with an unending search for innovative ways to enhance student learning; and creating small enough, meaningful units within the building that facilitated widespread discussions among students and adults.

Fully convinced of the value of listening to students as an important part of planning, implementing, and adjusting reform, we sought to extend this line of research to a larger cohort of middle school students, with periodic feedback points to the schools and District built in (see Corbett & Wilson, 1997a; Corbett & Wilson, 1997b; and Wilson & Corbett, 1999). Our overall purposes in conducting the study were to document students' perceptions of their educational experiences and to track how these perceptions evolved over a three-year period. Both we and PEF knew that the proof of Children Achieving would ultimately reside in increased student success in school—greater participation, higher achievement, and strengthened ability to direct their own learning in the future. Objective proof would likely be a long time coming. In the shorter term, it seemed worthwhile to see if something in students' school lives was going on that could give an indication as to what the District might expect in the way of results. Our assumption was that if this "something" was substantial, then we would hear it in students' descriptions of classroom activity.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AND ITS PARTICIPANTS

PEF initially selected five schools to participate, primarily because these served some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city and had been among the lowest performing on standardized measures of student achievement. In the final year of the study, a sixth school was added. This school, with a comparable student population, had additional resources to implement the District's reforms, including the partnership with the R&D center. The partnership had yielded several curriculum and instruction changes that were not yet apparent in the original five schools. Because one of the most remarkable parts of our interviews in the five original sites over the first two years was the consistency of students'

accounts about what went on in classrooms, we worried that such descriptions may not have been as sensitive to reform as we had originally thought they would be. Thus, including students who had clearly encountered different content and pedagogy would give us a better idea about the value of student talk as an indicator of reform's penetration to the classroom level.

The Student Sample and Interview Strategy

Each school selected fifty sixth graders to be interviewed. The schools varied in how they handled this task. One principal actually used the computer to randomly generate the list; two others turned the assignment over to the school's roster person; and the other two asked each SLC coordinator to identify a set of students. We emphasized our wish that the students reflect diversity in instructional experience, academic performance, behavior, motivation, gender, and race—proportional to the overall student populations in each school. Because the schools would remain anonymous to any groups beyond our funding agency and ourselves, they had little need to “stack the deck.” In getting to know the students, we had no sense that one segment of the student population was under or overrepresented. Schools notified students according to their established procedures, and each year we gave students the option of not participating when we actually showed up to interview them. Only a couple ever declined.

We interviewed the students individually in the spring of the year, usually for thirty to forty-five minutes. Each of us interviewed the same students over the three years, spending approximately an equal amount of time in the buildings. We talked to 247 sixth-grade students the first year. We could never track down three of the original 250—either they happened to be sick when we tried to contact them, had just been suspended, or had been spotted in the building but were not presently in the classroom they were scheduled to be in. By the third year, 172 (70 percent) of them were still available for interviews. Each year's attrition was mostly due to transfers within or outside the system. Of these 172 on the rolls in 1998, we interviewed 153, the remainder being, once again, either enrolled but chronically absent, enrolled but suspended, or enrolled and in school but too elusive to locate.

Also in the first year we interviewed a set of 114 eighth-grade students. We wanted to guard against the possibility that our sixth graders would note changes two years hence that were more the product of adolescent maturation and development than school improvement. This

proved to not be of consequence, as the eighth graders' collective accounts of their experiences were indistinguishable from the sixth graders'—both quantitatively in terms of the number of times students made a particular response and qualitatively in terms of the types of responses they made (see Corbett & Wilson, 1997a, for more on this point).

We developed the original interview protocol with input from PEF and school staff members. It is reproduced in the Appendix. Questions in subsequent years reflected important issues that emerged from the prior year's answers and, therefore, took the form of probes, asking students to explain what they had meant by previous comments, to describe if, how, and why a particular comment still applied to the current year, and to provide examples of their observations. We also tried to take advantage of the interests and concerns students brought up each year. Thus, the exact questions we used increasingly varied from student to student. The interviews were free-flowing, often resembling a conversation—with an unwavering focus on students' learning experiences and how they felt about them.

As middle-aged Caucasian males familiar with Ogbu's penetrating analyses of the subtexts of interracial relationships in schools (see, for example, Fordham & Ogbu, 2000), we wanted to disrobe ourselves of as much of the cloak of authority as we could. We quite naturally worried that students would regard us suspiciously and, therefore, would be circumspect with their answers. Our uneasiness increased because from the beginning of the study we were able to move about freely in the rambling buildings, unescorted and unidentified beyond signing in, and never once had our presence questioned—this in a time of heightened concerns about school security. Our conclusion was that people figured that two casual but neatly dressed, strange white men wandering about in inner-city schools had to be on “official” business.

We took several steps in an attempt to appear less official. First, we would ask students directly if they wanted to do an interview and when it would be convenient to do so. Not surprisingly, most students were reluctant to give up lunch and free time to talk. Respecting their choice of class periods necessitated our getting individual teachers' permission as well. While this strategy meant that we spent a good bit of time locating students and making arrangements ourselves, it gave us the opportunity to wander the halls and garner snippets of what the classes students described in the interviews looked and sounded like.

Second, we conducted the interviews in various places around the buildings—the back of an auditorium, a bench in a school foyer, a corner

of the library, an unused room, a machine shop, a stairwell. We wanted to stay away from the main office suite, avoid being in a place that other students could easily distract us, and offer the student some sense of confidentiality without being hidden.

Third, we took verbatim notes rather than used tape recorders. Our mobile interview strategy would have made using the recorders awkward, but, more important, we thought they would be too intrusive. Students took occasional comfort in the fact that no one other than ourselves could possibly decode our handwriting. The mouth, of course, is quicker than the hand. Our more than twenty years of recording conversations in this way had taught us several rules of thumb that improve the quality of field notes: use an idiosyncratic shorthand to denote the question asked, concentrate on the substantive phrases that follow standard stems (for example, capturing “she takes the time to make sure we understand” instead of beginning with “my teacher helps us a lot because”), throw in an occasional question for which you are not going to record the answer so that you can finish writing the previous answer (for example, “So, who is your favorite basketball player?” or “What do you think of the cafeteria food?”), and asking the student to pause a minute because you want to be sure to get down exactly what was said. Students sometimes would become curious about what we were writing and ask us to read back to them what they had said. Such immediate accuracy checks were helpful and legitimizing.

Data analysis followed a similar pattern each year. We began by reading our respective field notes and writing descriptive memos about emerging themes. We then reread the data to decide on predominant themes and to establish coding categories. For example, the importance of a teacher’s being “strict” quickly loomed large in the interviews, which caused us to identify all the different phrases students used to describe this action. Our subsequent categorization of the phrases made us realize that students used the term in both a disciplinary and instructional sense, as we will describe in chapter 4. Based on initial coding forays such as this, we would develop data displays of which students in which building made a response. This led to further interpretive memos and discussions. After several revisions, we arrived at the outline that formed the basis of that year’s report to PEF. Each of us then went back to our originally coded data to provide additional examples, filling in the outline. This book substantially elaborates the outline used for the third-year report, with occasional insertions from previous years.

We also compared students’ descriptions of school life in sixth grade with their final year comments. This was an attempt to see if grad-

ual changes had taken place that were unremarkable to students at any one point in time but were more substantial when viewed across the three years. Such comparisons bore out the students' assessments of little change.

The School Sites

All five of the original schools had veteran principals, and four of these remained in their buildings throughout the study. School #6's principal had been in place for just over a year when we talked with its students and left the following year. The one school with a leadership change—School #5, described below—made one of the more noticeable and positive changes in providing extra help to students during the new principal's second year. All six principals embraced the tenets of the District's reform initiative and worked diligently with their staffs to implement ideas they thought would work for their students. But each school had a character of its own.

School #1. The 1,000 sixth through eighth graders at School #1 were almost exclusively African American (99.3 percent). Relative to the other four schools in the study, these students came from homes that were somewhat better off. Eighty-three percent of the students were from low-income families. The school had a higher daily attendance figure (86 percent) than the other four schools. Students were mostly organized around "pods," with four classrooms sharing a common entry off a rectangular main hall. Students talked of their groups as "pods" rather than small learning communities (SLCs). Students at School #1 usually shared two teachers for their four core academic subjects.

School #2. The 700 seventh and eighth grade students were spread across the top two floors of a five-story building. Our cohort of sixth graders were the last sixth graders to be in the building. Their grade level was exclusively African American. They were split into two groups per grade and rotated among four teachers for their academic subjects within each group. The school had undergone a recent reorganization, resulting in this pattern. Attendance (82 percent) and family income (more than 90 percent low income) were both similar to Schools #3 through #5.

School #3. The largest school in the study, with 1,300 predominantly African Americans (98 percent), spread its students in grades six through eight across five floors. This school had the second highest proportion of

suspensions per year (17.6 percent) of the five schools. Students often encountered five different teachers for instruction in their core academic subjects. In fact, thirty-five different teachers worked with the class of eighth graders. The school was organized around seven different SLCs, each with a different occupational focus (for example, hotel and restaurant; law and government; performing arts; etc.).

School #4. Nearly 1,200 fifth through eighth grade students attended School #4. This school was the fastest growing, with a reported population of close to 1500 the year after we completed the study. Relative to the other four schools, School #4 had more racial diversity, with two-thirds of the students Latino and the rest African American. Students at School #4 made almost no mention of their SLCs other than to note that they attended assemblies based on their SLC assignment. Students were enrolled in five core academic subjects and, in most cases, saw three different teachers for those subjects. Unlike the experience of students in School #3 (of comparable size), eight teachers shared the instructional responsibility for the entire eighth-grade class.

School #5. With 660 students, this was the smallest school in the study. It had a predominantly African-American population (86 percent); the remainder were Latino. This school reported the most significant progress on SAT-9 scores during the study and yet was the poorest school with 97.6 percent low income, had the highest suspension rate (34 percent of the enrollment), and served the highest proportion of classified special education students (24 percent). The other schools labeled closer to 10 percent of their students as special education. The five sections of eighth-grade students saw either two or three different teachers for their five core academic subjects. This school also introduced a popular, and apparently effective, after-school program during the last year of our visits, about which more will be said in chapter 2.

School #6. Added in the final year of the study, School #6 was economically similar but demographically more diverse than the other five. Two-thirds of the students were Latino and African American, with the remainder being Asian (mostly from Cambodia and Vietnam) and Arab Americans. Around 85 percent of the students were from low-income families. The most noteworthy difference between School #6 and the others was its participation with the R&D center. The school is the primary subject of chapter 5. We present a much more detailed look at the school there.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN READING THIS BOOK

The main text contains both quantitative data—primarily the percentages of students who made a particular response—and qualitative data, which are illustrative comments from students about various topics. We did not ask every student every question. Some students took longer in answering certain questions, which did not leave enough time to ask others. We occasionally would try out a question on a subset of students to see what sort of response that brought; and, in the final two years, probing questions were based on a student's previous year's responses. Also, students were free to decline to answer anything we asked. This all means that the "Ns" for different sets of responses varied. In each case in which we give the number of students who offered a specific answer, we provide the total number of students asked the question. Students, of course, could give more than one answer to any question. Thus, sometimes "N" refers to the total number of responses students gave rather than the total number of students. We clearly identify such situations.

We rely heavily on student quotes. We feel that their words, not paraphrased by us, are much more powerful and poignant than ours. Moreover, our interest is in portraying the categories students used to characterize their classroom worlds, thereby enabling them to speak more directly to the reader rather than through our more highly abstracted interpretations of their perspectives. Therefore, the text is crammed with quotes.

As we explained earlier, we tried to take verbatim notes as the students talked, and in our excerpts from the interviews, we have remained faithful to the students' syntax and word choices. We did not correct improper grammar nor did we attempt to reconstruct their syntax in places where the students' talking speed exceeded our writing speed. The quotes in the following pages are what students said, with any paraphrases denoted by brackets.

In our feedback sessions to Philadelphia educators, the decision to use students' actual speech patterns received a mixed reaction. Some educators appreciated hearing the students' comments in their own words; they felt it made the statements more concrete, believable, and compelling. Others became distracted with the lack of subject-verb agreement, the portions of verbs students omitted, and mixed tenses. They thought this reflected poorly on the students, themselves, and the District's reform efforts—and would only reinforce global negative assessments of the quality of urban education. We stuck with our original decision.

In excerpts from the interviews, the “I” stands for the interviewer and the “S” for the student. Following each quote is a six-digit number. The first three comprise the student’s unique ID; the fourth is nearly always a 6, which denotes that the student was in the original sixth-grade cohort (to distinguish them from the eighth graders interviewed in the first year; comments from these students, though few, have an 8); the fifth is the student’s race (1 = African American; 2 = Hispanic/Latino; 4 = Asian; and 5 = Caucasian—these latter two designations were not needed until School #6 was added in the third year; for a while we used a 3 for “other” until we had more than one or two students in the category); and the sixth designates gender (1 = male and 2 = female). While inserting these codes into the text may distract some readers, it provides others with information about a student’s demographic characteristics and a way of checking the distribution of the quotes we used.

We use numbers as well for the schools (1–6) and the several teachers discussed in detail (for example, Teacher 1-A or Teacher 1-B). This device, though lacking stylistic merit, provides a way to associate the various student quotes, school examples, and teacher illustrations with one another.