

II

Ten Weeks, Three Strikes

Opening Day
September 9, 1968

Dozens of reporters,
 Crowding the sidewalk.
Hundreds of police,
 On side streets,
 In the schoolyard,
 Everywhere.
Children,
 Wandering about,
 Confused and bewildered.
Parents and teachers,
 No less confused,
 Eyebrows raised,
 Eyes squinting,
 Trying to tell friend from foe.
A perfect setting, perhaps,
 For a political convention,
 Or a football game.
Welcome to the first day of school.
 Junior High School 271
 Ocean Hill–Brownsville
 Brooklyn
 New York City
 The United States of America.

Outside the school doors, chaos reigned. The challenge inside was to create order. It wasn't easy. Sixty-two of our 109 teachers were in the district for the

first time, and 43 of us would be facing a classroom for the first time. There were still 11 vacancies. The striking UFT teachers, who had walked out during the last six weeks of the previous term, took door keys and roll-books with them, and had confused or lost many of the children's records.

Administrators were able to assign the 1,735 children enrolled to their official (homeroom) classes, where the sixth and seventh grades would spend the morning. Regular class assignments were scheduled for the afternoon. The school year began, fitfully but hopefully.

The eighth grade started the day with an orientation session in the auditorium. Filing in, the students, nearly all black, encountered a tableau unprecedented in the city's schools. On both sides of the stage stood black teachers, many dressed in colorful African-inspired garments, flanking ATA president and acting assistant principal Albert Vann. Tall and lean with a closely trimmed beard, the 33-year-old Vann had been a Marine sergeant as well as a civil rights activist. With an unmistakable air of authority, he opened with a focus on motivation.

"We are engaged in a fight for survival," he began, "the survival of the black race, of *our* race, of *our* people. Do you know what survival means?" Hands shot up. A brief dialogue ensued. A working definition was arrived at. "Yes, we must live together, and make it *as a race*. We must *survive*. And we cannot survive in this country without some very necessary skills, all kinds of skills, so we can get good jobs to help serve our people. We need the skills we can learn right here in 271: Math; Science; Reading; Typing; Languages. To survive and to prosper as a race of people, we *need* all these skills."

Having won the rapt attention of his audience, Vann went on to discuss student-teacher relations, a touchy subject in any ghetto school. "Now, to get these skills for survival, you must respect and listen to your teachers—*all* your teachers, be they black or white."

"However," he quickly added, "if *they* don't respect *you*, if we find that they can't do the job, there'll be some changes made. Now remember: Give your teachers, and many of them are new in this building, give them a chance. If you do find yourself in a dispute with a teacher, and you're right, we will defend you. You can depend on that."

Ending on a note of high spirit, Vann asked how many students listened to WWRL, the city's leading Afro-American radio station. As most hands went up, he gave them a full-throated cue from the popular James Brown recording: "*Then Say it Loud!*"

"*I'm Black and I'm Proud!*" thundered the unanimous response. Vann had indeed set a new tone for a new type of school for black boys and girls.

In his speech to the students, Vann had referred to the 43 teachers who were to face their first experiences leading a class. Many came to Ocean Hill–Brownsville with a fast-track teaching license, and possessed neither experience

nor formal training to prepare them for the job. Among them was one Charles S. Isaacs, 22 years old and just a year out of college.

Back to Brooklyn

A few short months earlier, I was nearing the end of a reasonably successful first year at the University of Chicago Law School, which had generously provided me with a full-tuition scholarship. I was thankful for my good fortune. It gave me the opportunity to be in a place where, in my view, everyone was smarter than me. I liked that. The law school, though, was a disappointment. Both politically and intellectually, it was a very conservative place. Too many courses were geared to produce skilled corporate servants, I thought. Constitutional law, civil rights law, and criminal law were underemphasized.

This was, of course, a shortsighted view. During the succeeding decades, I have worked with dozens of civil rights and constitutional lawyers, and even corporate attorneys, who were able either to use or overcome their formal training to make major contributions to the causes, organizations, and people I cared about.

But this was 1968. During the past decade, the great European colonial empires had crumbled in the face of revolutionary nationalist movements. Only a few African nations had not yet won their struggles for independence. The people were in the streets, forging new societies in France, in Germany, in Hungary, in Czechoslovakia. Here, our antiwar protests forced a President from office. Columbia University was being turned upside down by its students. Riots, disorders, and rebellions had hit more than a hundred cities in the aftermath of the King assassination. Social upheaval was in the air, throughout the country and most of the world. I enjoyed my quiet hours in the law library, but I was young, restless, and hungry for action. I wanted to make a difference. Right now. Sooner if possible.

Additional pressure was coming from the Selective Service System, which was breathing down my neck. Draft deferments for graduate students had been discontinued that year, and my draft board seemed obsessed with the prospect of plucking me out of Chicago and dropping me into Vietnam. I was never going to participate in the genocidal wars in Southeast Asia, and was willing to go to prison if necessary to avoid it. Actual graduation from law school didn't seem to be in the cards. I was closer to needing a lawyer than to becoming one.

Meanwhile, New York City was trying to fill a critical shortage of teachers. As one observer put it, "The New York school system is so desperately in need of teachers that it is ready to accept almost anyone who has taken the required education courses without fatal consequences."¹ In some subjects, chief among them mathematics, the desperation was extreme. The Board of

Education sent recruiters touring the country, looking for prospects. When one arrived in Chicago, we had a talk.

The recruiter looked at my transcript from Long Island University's Brooklyn Center, and lit up when he realized he was talking to a math major. To my surprise, he told me that I could qualify for a license to teach junior high school math, if I would just take any two-credit education course during the summer and pass a few tests at the Board. I would have a wide range of schools to choose from, and would probably qualify for a draft deferment if I chose an inner-city assignment. My only question was, "Where do I sign?" The recruiter filled out all the paperwork for the application.

(The draft deferment for working in "critical occupations" turned out to be discretionary on the part of the local draft boards, but was usually granted automatically. It brought thousands of young men from the country's best universities into ghetto schools. My local board, though, would use its discretion to deny me that deferment. This triggered an interesting three-year relationship between us which is, however, another story.)

So, after final exams, I told the registrar I was dropping out. She told me I couldn't do that because, "*Nobody* drops out of the University of Chicago Law School!" My bafflement eased when she offered to put me on an indefinite "Leave of Absence." (I've been on that leave for almost a half century now. Maybe I'll go back and finish one day.)

Back in Brooklyn during the summer, I took a two-week night course in Philosophy of Education, breezed through written and oral tests at the Board, and soon found myself a certified "permanent substitute" junior high school math teacher. I spent the rest of the summer as a volunteer tutor and draft counselor at an antipoverty program in Fort Greene, a black neighborhood adjacent to the LIU–Brooklyn campus, and interviewing at schools in and around Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The recruiter was right; it seemed I had my pick of schools in Black Brooklyn. Everyone whose judgment I trusted, though, had the same advice: "Go to Ocean Hill–Brownsville!" One of those advisors was a former LIU classmate, Steve Bloomfield. In 1966, he and I ran against each other for the presidency of the Student Government. He was the "left-wing hippie" candidate; I was the conservative, fraternity-backed candidate, and a heavy favorite to win. After three recounts, I won the election, but in a sign of the changing times, by a mere 1.4 percent of a heavy turnout. The contest behind us, we became close friends and our politics soon converged.

Bloomfield had taught in a Brooklyn elementary school during the year I was in Chicago, and was frustrated by what he described as a list of school priorities in which the children came last. He was looking for a more promising environment. I had been closely following the Ocean Hill–Brownsville story in the news during the previous year, and the advice I was getting made sense

to me. By now, it was almost universally acknowledged that the city's schools would never be desegregated, and that they would continue to fail black and Puerto Rican children unless some radical change was introduced.

We agreed that community control could be a historic leap toward both democracy and teacher accountability, promising a new day in quality education for the communities of color. There were also plenty of openings in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, since the Governing Board had resolved to replace all of the 350 teachers who had walked out on them during the previous spring. We decided that we would both apply for a job there, and that we would try to be assigned to the same school.

District assignments were made at the central Board of Education. I went to the Bureau of Personnel in downtown Brooklyn, and asked for assignment to Ocean Hill–Brownsville. The clerk looked at me like I was mad. “Why on earth would you want to go there?” I had a feeling that I shouldn’t waste time explaining my decision, so I again asked for the assignment. With a sigh, he stamped and handed over the appropriate forms. His expression said, “You’ll be sorry!”

There was one more hurdle to clear. Even though the central board had the legal authority to make assignments, the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Governing Board insisted on screening all new recruits. The screenings were conducted in a school cafeteria, where parents and board members sat at tables to which applicants were randomly assigned for interviews. I had no idea what to expect. I really had no reason to think any white teachers would be accepted in this experimental district spawned by the Black Power movement. (I had no way of knowing then that 70 percent of the teachers approved by the Governing Board would be white.)

I found myself sitting across the table from Rev. C. Herbert Oliver, the Governing Board chairman. After passing him my credentials, we talked for about ten minutes. In that brief time, we sized each other up. The soft-spoken Rev. Oliver conveyed an air of dignity, resolve, and intelligence that I instantly found attractive. He made me feel like a welcome guest in his home. I must have passed muster with him too; he shook my hand and sent me on a tour of the district’s schools. Bloomfield and I met with some of the principals and district staff, and both of us asked for assignment to JHS 271.

The school, built in 1962, was named for John M. Coleman, the first black member of the Board of Education, appointed in the mid-1940s as the black migration began to change the city’s demographics. Originally, it was a junior high school, with grades 7 through 9. During the mid-1960s, partly in response to the 1964 Allen Report, “intermediate” schools, comprising grades 5 through 8, came into vogue. Beginning with the 1968–69 school year, “271” was technically neither, since its grades were now 6, 7, and 8. Both terms were used to describe the school during that year, from press reports to the school

stationery. Among the staff and students, and in the vast majority of outside reporting, it continued to be referred to as a junior high school. Its student body was approximately 90 percent black and 10 percent Puerto Rican.

Later, I thought about the formulation that popped into my head when I met Rev. Oliver: *Welcome Guest*. I decided I was comfortable in this role. I would not be a Missionary in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, or a Savior delivering enlightenment, and certainly not a Colonial Emissary. Nor would I be a Visitor, just passing through like a tourist. The act of accepting an invitation to be a *guest* implies certain obligations to the *host* that extended the *welcome*. In civilized society, these include a duty to behave with a certain measure of respect toward that host. In this case, the host was the community of Ocean Hill–Brownsville and, by extension, the larger black and Puerto Rican community of which it was a part and, in the eyes of many, its vanguard of the moment. I would consider myself a guest, behave accordingly, and stay as long as I was welcome.

Of course, I have no idea whether this was really what was in Rev. Oliver's mind that day, only that it felt right to me. Even if I was guilty of over-thinking this issue, I'm quite sure that no inkling of these thoughts ever crossed the minds of the UFT teachers who had sabotaged the community control experiment, and whose union now held the entire city hostage in its crusade to destroy that effort.

First Time at Bat

So, here I was a few weeks later, my first day as a teacher, and my first day at JHS 271. I was impressed by Vann's presentation to the students, and even more so by their response. I was hopeful that this new atmosphere, with its emphasis on respect, pride, and self-esteem, could open new opportunities for them. My own self-esteem, though, was beginning to waver. After all, I had been made to feel welcome based on the premise that I could actually teach math to junior high school students.

"Whatever made me think I'd be good at this?" I wondered. I had done a considerable amount of public speaking during the previous five years, but none of it in a classroom full of restless adolescents. I had been successful as a tutor in the housing projects during the two previous summers, but that was one-to-one, not one-to-thirty. I had read plenty of books about the schools, but hadn't been in a junior high school since my own (which, by the way, I hated). "Suppose what I have to teach really doesn't interest the kids," I thought. "Maybe math really is boring to everyone except me and a few other strange people. What will I do if I get hit in the face?" A river of self-doubt was roaring.

Not assigned to an official class yet, my first assignment was to cover a sixth-grade homeroom for a teacher who was late to arrive. I was told to help the students fill out index cards with such data as names, addresses, and emergency contact information. This sounded simple enough, until I discovered that almost none of these 11 and 12 year-olds could write their own names! Obviously, they were also unable to read the textbooks they were carrying around. Somehow, all their teachers during their five or six years of previous schooling had apparently managed to keep them illiterate. I could only imagine the depth of their alienation from the institution of school. My reading about ghetto schools should have prepared me for this, but I found myself overcome with emotion. I was relieved to see their official teacher come through the door.

My next assignment was to cover an eighth-grade class for another teacher who had sent a message asking to be relieved. Showtime was approaching now, and whatever confidence I thought I had was giving way to premonitions of disaster. I climbed the stairs, walked down what seemed a very long corridor, and opened the classroom door. I had no idea what was awaiting me inside, and barely an outline of a hastily improvised plan.

Instantly, my doubts and fears vanished in a surge of anger-fueled adrenaline. The students were playing tic-tac-toe, talking, passing and throwing notes, and otherwise keeping themselves busy with one another. The teacher was shouting over the din, insisting that they address him as “Dr. Fruitbine” because he had a law degree (*Juris Doctor*). This was what he was up to after two hours with the class? The kids were totally turned off, and I could see why. Fortunately, the good “doctor” was happy to turn the class over right away, so he could hurry downstairs to the cafeteria.

The class quieted down for the transition, so I quickly took advantage of the opportunity. “Good morning,” I said. Following a reasonably polite response, I told them my name and wrote it on the board. “People call me ‘Charlie,’ and you can too,” I added, surprising everyone in the room, myself included.

Reactions to this were mixed. Some smiled. Others were intrigued. A few protested that they were supposed to address their teachers as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” I said that would be fine if it made them more comfortable.

This might have confused them a little, but it did get me their attention. Without missing a beat, I started right in. “How many people,” I asked, “don’t like math?” Practically the whole class raised their hands. “How many people think math is a hard subject?” Now every hand was up.

I smiled and clapped my hands. “All right,” I stated with great apparent conviction, “Now I’m going to show you how easy and how much fun math really is!” The room buzzed with disbelief.

“This man is crazy,” said one boy. “Out of his head,” agreed another. But they were still curious, maybe even more so now, and willing to give me a chance.

“Somebody tell me what the speedometer on a car is.”

“I knew it,” came a voice from the rear. “This ain’t math.”

“How many miles,” called out another.

“You mean if I travel ten miles, the speedometer will say ‘10,’ and if I go 100 miles, it will say ‘100’?”

“No, not that,” another student impatiently explained. “It says how fast you be going.”

“So, if the speedometer says ‘60,’ what does that mean?”

“It means you going sixty milezanour.”

“Does everyone agree?” As the class nodded assent, I wrote on the board: “60 m/h.”

“Now, if I drive for one hour, how far have I gone?”

“Sixty miles, of course!” I could see that this one was running out of patience with my thick-headedness.

On the board now: “60 m.”

“In two hours?”

A little delay, then a minor discovery: “If you go sixty miles in the first hour, then you go sixty more in the second: a hundred and twenty.”

“Does everyone agree?” They did. “And in three hours?”

A shorter pause. “180!” Now we had a chart on the board.

60 MPH

<u>Hours</u>	<u>Miles</u>
1	60
2	120
3	180

“What do you notice about this chart?”

“Every time the number under ‘hours’ goes up 1, the number under ‘miles’ goes up 60.”

“Right. Now, if I travelled for ten hours, how many sixties would I go?”

“Ten!”

“And what’s a short way of adding ten of the same thing together?”

“Multiply times ten.”

“So you could get the number of miles by multiplying ten times sixty?”

“Right.”

“And suppose I drove at 40 MPH for five hours?”

“Five times forty.”

“How do you know?”

“The number of hours times how many miles each hour.”

Now on the board: “Hours \times Speed = Miles.” Success!

This was fun. Now we went on to miles per minute, feet per second, and so on, until the class discovered the general formula for these calculations, commonly committed to rote memory as “Rate times Time equals Distance.”

I hoped this formula would have more meaning for the class than something simply committed to memory. They had discovered it themselves, with a little help from the Socratic Method, and they understood it, even if they didn’t memorize the words. Of course, some children still protested that this “wasn’t math.” Why? Because it wasn’t boring, and there was no mindless drilling.

This whole lesson took no more than twenty minutes. I had no idea how much more time I would have with them, but I knew we were on a roll. I used the same method to introduce short, discrete, abstract topics, so we wouldn’t be interrupted in the middle of a big project. They worked their way through Zero, Infinity, and Negative Numbers. I didn’t expect them to remember all this, but I was committed to changing their attitude about math.

After an hour and a half, their “Dr.” Fruitbine returned, bursting with one critical query: “Were they quiet?” Thankfully, they were not.

I just thanked the class, said my good-byes, and left the room, too satisfied with this first class to bother responding to the question. I knew this had been a very bright group of students, and that not every class would be so easy to teach, but now I had gained some confidence in my abilities. Performance skills honed addressing LIU and University of Chicago protest rallies translated very well, it seemed, to the classroom.

In fact, I soon found that teaching came very easily to me, even without any formal training. I did find this a little surprising, given all the bellyaching I had heard from white teachers in inner-city schools. It was only much later that I developed a theory that explained it.

Down in the lunchroom, I was introduced to Steve Mayer, a veteran Social Studies teacher. Mayer had transferred into Ocean Hill–Brownsville from another district, where he represented his colleagues in the UFT Delegate Assembly for three years, and served as the union’s Chapter Chairman during the previous year. In his view, he had not deviated from the principles that attracted him to union activism; it was the UFT that had turned away from its own progressive origins.

I later learned that Mayer had been active in Brooklyn CORE during its most militant period, when it mounted massive campaigns against discrimination in housing, employment, and education. He had married another CORE activist, a black woman, at a time when interracial marriage was not only unusual, but illegal in almost half of the United States. His liberal-leaning Jewish family, having failed to dissuade him, cut him off over this decision.

I also found that Mayer had an encyclopedic knowledge of history. He soon became a trusted advisor.

On this day, Mayer invited me to sit in on his next class. Still without an assignment of my own, I happily accepted.

The New . . .

It was an eighth-grade class, ranked as “average” by whoever made these judgments, which Mayer was meeting for the first time. Hoping to counteract the restlessness triggered by the turbulent times, as well as afternoon fatigue, he began quickly and confidently to get the class’s attention.

After a brief introduction, he began with the display of a colorful picture cutout from *Life Magazine*. It showed slum housing inhabited by poor black people. “Where,” he asked, “have you seen buildings like these before?”

A slight pause, even though the whole class could easily have answered the question. Murmurs of discomfort, then recognition. Suddenly, responses burst forth.

“Hull Street . . . Herkimer . . . along Atlantic Avenue.”

“Yes, right here in our own neighborhood. In Social Studies, we’ll be studying housing problems in New York City, along with other problems, like education and employment and discrimination.”

“For example,” Mayer continued, showing other pertinent pictures of city life, “We’ll try to answer questions like, “What are the most important problems in housing?”

“The slums,” interrupted an unsolicited answer.

“Yes, and who is responsible for the slums? How can housing be improved? We’ll deal with other problems too. First, I’d like you to read a poem (slight groans from corners of the room) about a conflict between a landlord and a tenant. It was written by Langston Hughes.”

As Mayer showed a picture of the great black poet, trepidation gave way to interest and approval. “A colored man!”

“A man?” Mayer asked, in good-natured disapproval. The youngster was quickly corrected by many of his classmates. “Black Man!” “Afro-American!” Mayer went on to distribute copies of Hughes’ “Ballad of the Landlord,” and had the students first read it to themselves. The poem begins . . .

*Landlord, Landlord
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?*

*Landlord, landlord
These steps is broken down.*

*When you come up yourself,
It's a wonder you don't fall down.²*

It goes on to tell a simple story that instantly resonated with the class. The tenant urges the landlord to make necessary, overdue repairs. The landlord responds by demanding the rent. When the tenant refuses to pay until repairs are made, the landlord threatens eviction. The tenant threatens a punch in the face. The landlord calls the police, who arrest the tenant for assault and sedition. After a quick trial and conviction, he is sentenced to 90 days in jail.

When everyone finished reading, Mayer continued, "Let's take it stanza by stanza to see what actually happened to the tenant, and then we'll have opinions about the poem." The class jumped right to opinions.

"That landlord should be shot!"

"I woulda done the same thing the tenant did!"

"He shouldn't have gone to jail."

"I saw the same thing happen on my block last year."

"One minute," Mayer interrupted, "We'll get to all of you. Let's speak one at a time."

He asked a student to read the first three stanzas aloud.

Then, "Who is the main character in the poem?"

"The tenant . . . a black tenant."

"How do you know he's black?"

"By the way he talks," a girl answered, sucking her lips at the teacher for asking such an easy question. "Besides, it says so at the end."

"Good. Why is he angry?"

"You would be too if you had a leak that wasn't fixed. And falling on broken steps."

"It's an old, dirty, nasty house!"

"Garbage all around, and he has to pay rent for it too."

"Continue reading. What does the landlord do?"

"He shuts off the heat because he didn't pay the rent."

"And he was gonna throw the tenant's furniture out in the street."

"He got an ev-(with some help), an eviction notice against the colored, I mean the black man."

"What's an eviction notice?" Mayer interjected, while writing the words on the board.

Pause. A boy in the back of the room volunteered, "It's when they . . ."

"Who is 'They'?"

"When some men from the city and some cops make you get out your house because you didn't pay the rent or somethin'. And they throw all your things in the street. Like when I saw this happen on my block. This lady, she

had her bed and clothes in the street, and everybody was watchin', and she was cryin' and everything." He continued to describe this experience in vivid detail.

"Good answer. Did the landlord evict the tenant in the poem?"

"No, but he was gonna."

"What does the tenant do then?"

"He hits him."

"And the landlord calls the cops."

"The pigs!" someone interrupted from the back row.

Most of the class murmured approval of the correction. Some looked at the teacher, waiting for his reaction. Mayer answered, "We can discuss *that* later!" I had a feeling that they would.

"Let's continue. Was the tenant justified in hitting the landlord?"

"Sure. I woulda done the same thing."

"He shouldn't have shut off the heat. There's children in those houses, and old people."

"I don't know. He might have waited a while longer."

"Yeah, but he was gonna evict him. He was a slumlord and he deserves it."

The spirited discussion continued, sparked by challenging questions. "What eventually happened to the tenant, and did he deserve his fate?" "Would the same thing have happened to a white man?" "Does this poem remind you of anything happening in your own neighborhood?"

Finally, "What do the police do in the poem?" And, "How does what they're doing here in Ocean Hill–Brownsville compare with that?"

Mayer's plan was to use the poem as a springboard to further discussions of the wider problems of inner-city housing and, eventually, of other urban issues. It looked to me like he knew exactly how to go about doing this.

This wasn't the first time I had seen "Ballad of the Landlord." I knew that Jonathan Kozol, author of *Death at an Early Age*, had used the poem in a Boston ghetto school. After a supervisor charged that the poem "could be interpreted as advocating defiance of authority," he was fired.³ There was no chance of Steve Mayer being fired for using that poem in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, where it was an accepted fact that survival depended on defiance of authority deemed illegitimate.

I later asked Mayer what he thought would have happened had he used the same lesson in any other NYC school district. In all likelihood, he said, he probably would not have been disciplined. He explained that the administrators of ghetto schools usually don't concern themselves with such mundane matters as the actual content of classroom lessons. Their primary concern is the main business of education as they view it: Discipline, the teacher's euphemism for "Law and Order" in the classroom. The administrators he had encountered were rarely concerned with what went on in any classroom, as long as it was done quietly. Any teacher able to contain children in quiet rooms was rated

“Satisfactory” and retained year after year, up to and including the awarding of tenure.

Mayer summarized the logic behind what he said passed for educational philosophy in the city schools: “Only when you shut ‘em up, can you learn ‘em some.” “Shut ‘em up,” took precedence over “learn ‘em some,” though. The actual content of a particular lesson was just not very important. So, a simple tacit agreement between teacher and student was often reached: As long as relative silence is maintained, each party leaves the other one alone.

No, Steve Mayer would probably not have been fired from a NYC school. At worst, there might have been some upturned eyebrows, some official discomfort, or some irrational mumblings of extremism or troublemaking, if anyone noticed at all. But most supervisors, he explained, would probably concede that, “After all, the lesson was confined to his own room,” or, “At least he can control his class.”

. . . Meets the Old

At the end of the school day, it became pretty clear to me how the eighth-graders I met that morning had learned that math was boring and difficult. A Mathematics Department staff meeting was presided over by Claire Devine and Ira Brand, two assistant principals who had been in the school system for many years. It was attended by all of our math teachers, most of whom were actually licensed in unrelated subjects and were teaching math out-of-license, plus elementary school teachers who were put in this department just because it had vacancies.

After ascertaining these shortcomings in the staff, Brand told the untrained people not to worry. “After all,” he explained, “You probably do know more than the kids.” Later, Mrs. Devine explained her philosophy of teaching mathematics. “I don’t believe in any of this ‘New Math’ business,” she emphatically declared. “The only way to make these kids learn math is drill, drill, drill, and more drill!”

“Why,” I asked, “do we have to *force* the kids to learn math?”

“Because they won’t learn it if you don’t force them,” she replied. “You have to pound it into their heads!” By that time, my own head was pounding.

It had taken until the end of the first day for me to encounter, up close and in person, the then prevailing philosophy of education in the City of New York’s public schools. Ocean Hill–Brownsville held the promise of something new, a new spirit that I had witnessed during the course of that first day, but it was very clear that the old ways were not yet ready to concede the field.

Most of our assistant principals represented these old ways. When Jack Bloomfield, the former principal, resigned during the middle of the previous

term, all but one of the assistant principals went with him, along with thirty teachers and five of the school's six secretaries. While the Board of Education had allowed the Governing Board wide latitude in hiring new principals and teachers, the existing rules and union contracts required that replacement assistant principals be chosen from the top of the existing civil service list. The tests that produced the lists of certified supervisors, administered by the semi-independent Board of Examiners, were widely viewed as irrelevant to the jobs for which they were being certified.⁴ As one observer put it . . .

Like the former Chinese gentry, New York school administrators are ranked in a rigid hierarchy of status, achieved through the passage of Confucian examinations which fail to measure either the intellectual or temperamental qualities needed for the job.⁵

The examination process, which included an oral exam, was also notorious for racial discrimination.⁶ (In 1972, a federal court would order the end of these exams, since they had the “effect of discriminating significantly and substantially against qualified black and Puerto Rican applicants.” It concluded that the examination process constituted a “merit system” in name only, and that it bore no relation to job performance.⁷) Out of the 1,500 assistant principals in the city school system in 1967, twelve were black.⁸ There were few blacks or Puerto Ricans even on the lists, and any who did get onto them would have to wait years for an actual supervisory appointment, since only the top three individuals on the list could be considered to fill a vacancy. As a result, four of our five certified assistant principals had been imposed on the district.

Once I understood this, I also understood how Norman Rabinowitz, an assistant principal in our supposedly community-controlled school, could have instructed the teachers, during the pre-school faculty orientation, not to grade any child higher than “75” in any subject in any marking period. “Students in this school,” he proclaimed to any teachers who might have had higher expectations of their students, “are not capable of higher scores.” What I still did not understand was how our principal, William H. Harris, could have allowed this remark to stand. Maybe he just knew that none of the teachers would pay any attention to it. I certainly didn't intend to.

Harris, like McCoy, was formerly the acting principal of a 600-school. He had been appointed by the Governing Board as principal of an elementary school a year earlier, and transferred to JHS 271 when Jack Bloomfield left in January. Before his appointment, there were a total of four black principals in all of New York City's 865 schools, all of them assigned to elementary schools.⁹ The Governing Board's other appointments were Luis Fuentes, the city's first Puerto Rican principal; Ralph Rogers (black, Jewish), and Irving Gerber (white, Jewish). David Lee, appointed to succeed Harris at PS 178, became the city's

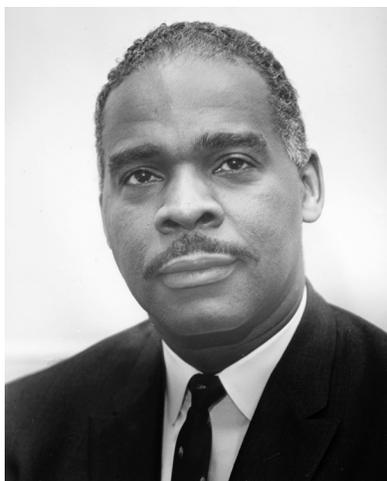


Figure 2.1. William H. Harris, principal of JHS 271 (1968).

first Chinese principal. The sixth appointee, for IS 55 which was under construction, was Herman Ferguson, a respected, experienced administrator, who was also a well-known black nationalist who had recently been indicted for conspiring to murder “moderate” civil rights leaders. Although it was widely believed that these charges were trumped up, Donovan vetoed his appointment and suspended his employment. McCoy and the Governing Board continued to back Ferguson, but IS 55 would open without him.¹⁰ Ferguson was retained as a consultant to the IS 201 district.

None of the Governing Board’s appointees were among the eligible candidates on the civil service list. As an accommodation to the experiment in community control, the State Commissioner of Education had created a new category of “demonstration school principal,” which required only state certification plus a connection to the community. This innovation was immediately challenged in a lawsuit filed by the Council of Supervisors & Administrators (CSA), which was joined by the UFT, thus uniting white labor with white management in the defense of an indefensible status quo. The principals’ appointments were invalidated in a March court ruling. Pending the Board’s appeal of that ruling, they remained in place.

Most of the staff stayed in school long after the dismissal bell that first day, as we would most days during the school year. There was plenty of information to process, and planning to do for the days ahead. That was when I met John Mandracchia, the only certified assistant principal in the school who supported community control.

White, balding, and 40 years old, Mandracchia had voluntarily transferred from another district a year earlier. Teachers who worked with him told me that he quickly gained the respect of staff, students, and parents. He had been able to bridge the multitude of gaps that separated his background from those of the young black and Puerto Rican students. He had a deep understanding of the urban crisis, even though his home was far out on Long Island. His connection between thought and action necessitated starting the day at 4:30 each morning and, on occasion, spending the night in school because there just wasn't time for his four-hour round-trip commute. He was exceptional in more ways than one.

When I asked Mandracchia what our school's most important innovation was, he quickly replied, "For the first time, black kids have an opportunity to identify with black leadership in their school."

It had been quite an education for this math teacher, on my first day at JHS 271.

Strike One

Only 10 percent of the city's schools actually opened on September 9, most of them in black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods where opposition to the illegal strike was passionate. This was the most effective of the UFT's four citywide strikes during the past eight years, with 93 percent of the 57,000 teachers staying home or joining picket lines. Only 48,946 out of 1.13 million students were able to attend classes.¹¹

The CSA held a rally at Manhattan Center during the school day, attended by 3,300 of the system's 4,000 school supervisors. Following an open "debate" during which not a single dissenting voice was heard, they voted, in violation of a court order upholding the Taylor Law, to not only support, but to join the UFT strike. Walter Degnan, president of the group, called Ocean Hill–Brownsville a "malignancy" that could spread, and proclaimed that the district's Governing Board "believes in anarchy."¹² This nearly all-white management organization, which had never fought for improved education and had consistently opposed the UFT, now emphatically joined forces with the union against black and Puerto Rican Ocean Hill–Brownsville, and would hold the entire city hostage to their demands. The principals vowed to keep their schools closed, both to children and to the non-striking teachers who wanted to do their jobs. Since the official policy of the Board of Education was that the schools were open, this was a case of massive, unprosecuted insubordination.

"Their course," editorialized the *New York Times* "on the part of unions and supervisors alike, can only spell disaster for the essential revitalization of the schools and the reconciliation of the community."¹³

In Ocean Hill–Brownsville, all eight schools were open and operating with enough staff to carry on fairly normal activity, considering that so many of the teachers were newly hired. The majority of the registered students came to school. At JHS 271, this entailed passing through a massive police presence and a boisterous UFT picket line just to reach the front door. I understood why the pickets were there, but could not fathom at the time why there were so many police on the scene.

Regular classes were assigned on the second day, September 10. I was to teach four eighth-grade classes in a second-floor classroom overlooking the street. I was pleased with the room location since the rear rooms overlooked the schoolyard, which had been commandeered as the staging area for the thousand-strong police occupation. This would have been an unnecessary distraction.

For the first lesson, I thought the most important objective was to engage the students in a “math can be fun” activity. I began by asking if they’d like to see a magic trick, which of course they did. I asked them to write down two secret numbers, the first between 1 and 9, the second between 10 and 99. The trick was that I would “read their minds” and tell them what those secret numbers were, but first they would have to play along with me for a little while. Intrigued by the challenge, the students responded, on paper, to instructions like the following:

1. Multiply your first number by two.
2. Add six to the result
3. Multiply your new answer by five.
4. Now multiply by ten (by tacking on a zero).
5. Add your second secret number.
6. Finally, subtract 271.

Once each student announced the final result, I could figure out the two original numbers by simply subtracting 29, then separating the difference into two numbers by drawing an imaginary line to the left of the tens digit. If, for example, the student’s answer was 619, I would subtract 29 to get 590; the original numbers, then, would have been 5 and 90.

One by one, as the results were announced, I performed what appeared to be magic. As long as there were no mistakes in calculation, my little trick had to work. (Some classes required simpler instructions, but the principles remained the same.) At first, the students were mystified at the feat, but this soon gave way to intense curiosity, and they demanded an explanation of “how you got it.” While there was no complicated theory behind the trick,

the explanation did involve some understanding of place values in addition to the basic arithmetic. The general theory, which came next, introduced some basic rules of algebra. Through all this, very few of the students had trouble keeping up. By the time they realized they were actually doing math, it was too late to tune out.

Late that afternoon, the UFT, the CSA, and the Board of Education, over Galamison's objections, signed a contract that ended the strike. All the 210 UFT teachers who still wanted to go back to Ocean Hill–Brownsville would be sent there, with police protection, the next morning. Any dismissals by local boards would now be subject to the lengthy, expensive process of arbitration. Union officials, such as chapter chairmen, would have "super-seniority" that would protect them from involuntary transfer. All local boards would be forever bound by "present agreements" between the union and the Board. The City would not only pay the salaries of all the teachers for their two days of participation in the illegal strike, but they would also pay the 350 teachers who illegally walked out on Ocean Hill–Brownsville for the last six weeks of the previous term. The Board of Education had not only condoned, but rewarded, a double violation of the Taylor Law. "We have won on every basic issue," announced Shanker.¹⁴

The Governing Board, left out of the negotiations, had promised not to block the return of the teachers themselves, but made no promises of cooperation, and no guarantees regarding the actions of their constituents. The UFT ignored this statement, taking the position that the Governing Board must simply comply with the agreement. On September 11, the teachers were to return.

A Rocky Return

It was no surprise to anyone when the UFT group met a blockade on the steps of JHS 271 that morning, least of all the police force, which outnumbered the forces on every side of the dispute. The stalemate broke for the moment without incident, though, when the front door opened from the inside. Leonard Buder of the *Times* reported on what happened next, with a curious twist on the racial context.

Lloyd Sealy, assistant chief inspector of police, emerged with three Negro policemen and William Harris, the school's principal. Chief Sealy, a Negro, asked Mr. Harris whether Mr. Nauman and his colleagues should be admitted to the school and the Negro principal said they should. There appeared to be no resistance, and the teachers went into the building.¹⁵

Buder documented for the record that no less than five “Negroes” paved the way for the UFT cohort to enter the school, as though the perimeter was not occupied by hundreds of white cops.

They were not in the school for long. Summoned to an “orientation session” with McCoy, they headed back out. Then, the day began much like the first two at JHS 271. Once the students and teachers waded through the police and press, once the classroom doors were shut, we were able to close out the disruptions, to teach and to learn.

What happened at the meeting with McCoy, held in the IS 55 auditorium, is a matter of some dispute. Buder noted that it was closed to the press. He relied solely on the UFT’s Fred Nauman to report the story. According to Nauman, the one hundred teachers in the auditorium were joined by about forty parents, along with some militants who “carried crash helmets.” “At 11:20,” wrote Buder, “the teachers came out of the building, charging that the meeting had been totally disrupted by parents and community representatives.”¹⁶ McCoy ended it by telling them to take a lunch break, and then go back to their schools. The teachers griped about enduring verbal abuse going down the school steps, but none were assaulted.

In the histories of the conflict, this report has been embellished with varying degrees of hysteria, but never with named sources. The authors attribute their information either to each other, to anonymous teachers, or to no-one at all. In *The Strike that Changed New York*, for example, Jerald Podair states that the teachers were surrounded by men “brandishing sticks and bandoliers of bullets” who cursed them, threw the bullets at them, and threatened to carry them out in pine boxes. His source is Martin Mayer’s *The Teachers Strike: New York, 1968*, which presents this story without referencing any source at all.¹⁷ (As we will see, this freelance journalist’s distortions of reality would play an important role in shaping the outcome of the community control experiment.) A similar account, in *Time Magazine*, quoted a single unnamed teacher.¹⁸

Perhaps the most florid account, in Barbara Carter’s *Pickets, Parents and Power*, also offered no sourcing:

“Why do you come back where you’re not wanted?” the teachers were asked. “We don’t want you,” someone cried. Flick. A .30 caliber cartridge sailed through the air and fell among them. Flick. Another came. Someone switched the lights on and off. . . .¹⁹

And so on. In Shanker’s 2007 biography, *Tough Liberal*, Richard Kahlenberg again has the militants “armed with sticks,” and the teachers are warned that they’re “going out of here in pine boxes,” but he offers only the same old circular self-referencing sources, none of them primary.²⁰ The only named primary

source is Nauman's quote in the *Times* account, which says nothing about sticks, bullets, flickering lights, or pine boxes.

Notably absent among the primary sources for these stories are the several Governing Board members who were present, even though Rev. Oliver was on record about it in a 1969 interview, published the following year. In that interview, he claims that most of the community people were women, that no lives were threatened, that the teachers expressed a sneering, condescending attitude, that they insulted Governing Board members, and that it was all on tape.²¹ That interview has, to my knowledge, never been quoted by any historian. After more than forty years, no one has ever asked Rev. Oliver for that tape recording.²²

In order to get a report from the “militants” who were in the room, I had to ask them myself, since no one else ever did. According to Project Method's Paul Chandler and Brother Sun, there were no cartridges thrown, and the teachers were never in any danger because the rear wall of the auditorium was lined with police. The mayor's Urban Task Force was also represented. There was lots of shouting, though, on both sides. When I asked about the flickering lights, which could certainly have been terrifying, Chandler (who later worked at IS 55 and knew the building well) told me something that has never before been reported: The auditorium lights were not operated by switches, but by turning a key in a lock. No one but the principal and the custodian would have such a key. There *could not have been* any flickering of the lights.²³ Anyone reporting on this story could have known this, had they only asked.

At about one o'clock, JHS 271's UFT contingent came down the block. The police presence now, surrounding just our one school, included 3,000 helmeted officers; 35 mounted police; 150 plainclothes detectives; three communications units; a mobile command center; helicopters hovering overhead; and sharpshooters stationed on the roofs of surrounding houses. This was the force considered necessary to escort the nine unwanted teachers who showed up that day.²⁴

By then, about a hundred parents and community activists were back on the steps, blocking the front door. The UFT teachers headed toward the entrance, surrounded by a wedge of police in riot gear. Paddy wagons pulled up to the curb.

I began to watch from my second floor window when the noise of all this prompted some of my students to look out the window, tuning out their algebra lesson. My hopes for a classroom free of distractions were quickly dashed. A commotion began out on the sidewalk. One student shouted, “Hey! That's my mother!” and the entire class joined him at the window. Parents, including one very pregnant woman, were being dragged into the wagon. Others, trying to interfere, were beaten back. Meanwhile, facing empty seats, I had to decide