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School Lays Strong Foundation

By Laurel Shaper Walters

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

PROVIDENCE, R.I.

Community Prep in Providence, R.I., helps students who 'tend to get lost' build solid educational base for college

EVERY school day begins the same way here at the Community Preparatory School in a poor section of south Providence, R.I.

"The whole school gets together, and we say a pledge to ourselves," says fourth-grader James Deignan.

When asked if he can repeat the pledge, James doesn't hesitate. Looking straight ahead through round-framed glasses, he recites the pledge, which was written by acclaimed Chicago educator Marva Collins: "This day has been given to me fresh and clear. I can either use it or throw it away. I promise that I shall use this day to the fullest, realizing that it can never come back again. I realize that this is my life to use or throw away."

Community Prep, as the school is known locally, was founded in 1984 by former college roommates Daniel Corley, a teacher, and Robert Hahn, an economist.

The school's mission is to give its students a strong educational foundation enabling them to go on to college-prep high schools and eventually

to college.

"We're here to challenge the level of expectation [for each child]," says Mr. Corley, who is the principal. "Right now it is only the real cream of the crop for whom college is held out as a real possibility. We want to say that average students ... should have college clearly in mind for themselves, should learn how to think and have the skills necessary to succeed in a rigorous college-prep high school program."

The school began with 25 students in three rented classrooms. Corley and two other teachers received a salary of \$11,000 each that first year.

After several years of renting space at the local YMCA, the school purchased its own building. Community Prep moved into its new home this year. A staff of 12 educates 80 students in grades 4 to 8.

Originally, all the students were from the neighborhoods of southwest Providence. And everyone received substantial financial aid.

Today, some students come from wealthier sections of the city. But only 12 percent of all students pay the full tuition of \$4,500. More than 70 percent of students receive financial aid for more than half of their tuition.

No student has ever been turned away because of finances. Funding comes from corporate grants, individual donations, and a small state subsidy.

The school is devoted to diversity among its small group of students. This year's student body is 40 per-

cent black, 25 percent white, 15 percent Asian, and 20 percent Hispanic.

Through a partnership with the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, Community Prep also has six deaf students. "We see hearing impairment as just another aspect of diversity," says Andrea Joseph, director of development at the school.

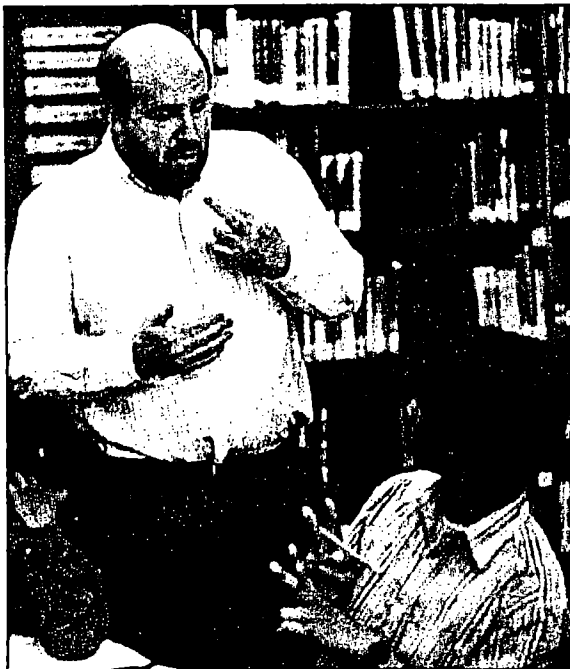
In a sixth-grade class, two teachers stand at the front of the room. One is talking, and the other is translating the lesson and discussion into sign language. It makes for a lively atmosphere of varied communication.

Eighth-grader Joyce Hopkins, a hearing student, began taking sign language when she first came to Community Prep two years ago. "I wanted to communicate with [the deaf students] so much," she says. "And I always wanted to learn another language." This year, Joyce is teaching sign language to other students at the school.

Classes are small at Community Prep, and individual attention is enhanced by a steady flow of volunteers. Most classrooms throughout the school have more than one adult working with the students.

Barbara Churches, a community volunteer and retired teacher, helps out in the seventh-grade math class several days a week. "I came to the school and asked, 'Do you have a place for volunteers?'" Ms. Churches recalls. The staff at Community Prep welcomed her into the school.

Interns from various colleges in the area come in to run regular



SIGN LANGUAGE LESSON: Teacher John Carty talks with a hearing-impaired student at Community Prep School.

CPS articles

for Gainer McCowan



LEARNING MATH: *Principal Daniel Corley with Alycia Muse and Chante Ross.*

group activities. The college students organize an after-school program and take over classes during Monday morning staff meetings. "We want to make use of all the resources that we can," Ms. Joseph says.

The school year is divided into five terms. At the beginning of each term, students meet with their teacher and parents to set goals. Grades are based on how well students do in meeting their goals. "The kids end up taking a lot of responsibility for their work," says Joseph, who has a son at the school.

The entrance requirements at Community Prep are still evolving. For the first few years, "we had no admissions criteria; we accepted everybody," Corley says. He saw a need to help middle-school students in the neighborhood perform better academically, and he simply responded to the need without a long-term plan for the school.

"I'm more of a throw-yourself-into-the-middle-of-a-situation type person," Corley says. "It's not the best management style, I've come to find out. But it's pretty good for getting things started."

In the third year, Corley began to rethink the school's structure. He committed himself to putting more money into teacher's salaries. In addition, all incoming students were required to have scored at least in the 70th percentile on the math or reading portion of their standardized tests.

"The thinking was that if they scored in the 70th percentile in math and were weak in reading comprehension, they've shown good native intelligence in one area, and we can work from there," Corley says. "We've come to find that marked discrepancies in test scores are also a sign of learning disabilities."

The new admissions requirement drew a disproportionate number of students with special needs into the school and created a challenge for the small staff. For this reason, Community Prep is revising the admissions guidelines. As of next year, incoming students are required to have a minimum average in the 60th percentile on standardized tests.

"We're still looking at the average or above-average student," Corley says. "We're not at all taking the cream of the crop." The goal is to make sure "we can meet the needs of those people who come through our doors."

"The public-school system has programs for the gifted and people who can work with the learning disabled," Ms. Joseph says. "It is those kids in the middle range who are given no special attention and tend to get lost ... that we think we can really make a difference with."

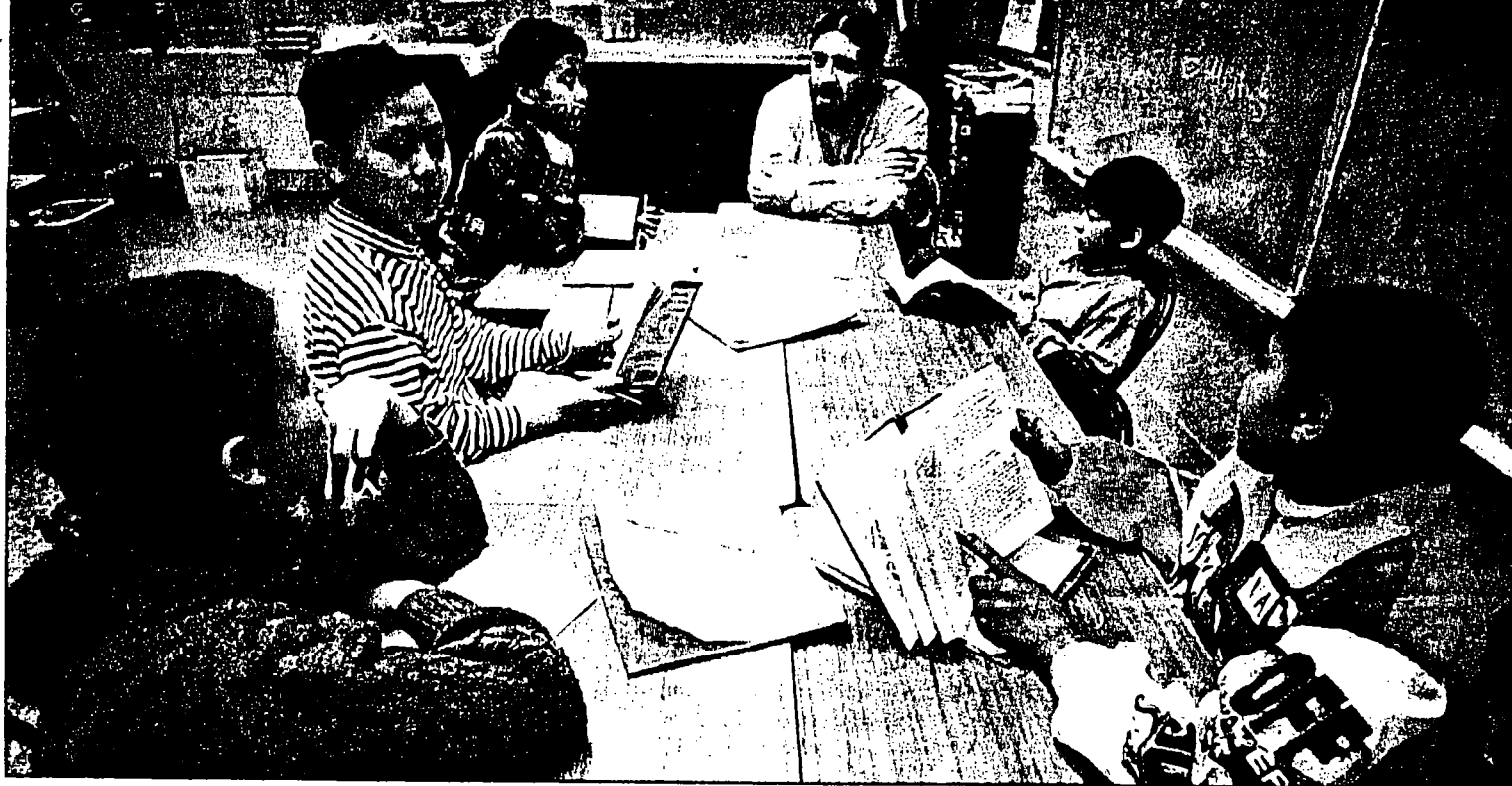
Corley has had to devote much of his time in the last several years to fund-raising for the school. "We've worked hard at getting resources together, helping us to establish a home. We're permanent now; we own a home in the neighborhood," he says. Now he plans to give more attention to what goes on inside the school. "I've been in more living rooms of prospective donors than in the living rooms of prospective parents over the last three years," Corley says. "This year that is changing."

Community Prep has graduated almost 50 students, and all of them have been accepted to college-prep high schools. Some attend the public magnet high school; others are attending New England boarding schools.

The first Community Prep graduate is now a freshman at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. And he's on the Dean's List, school administrators report with pride.

The 1992 graduates – today's eighth graders – have sent off their batches of applications and are waiting for word on acceptances. "It's nail-biting time," says Joyce, who applied to nine high schools.

But Damiso Husband, another eighth grader, isn't worried. When he went to visit high schools a while ago, the students were doing math that he had already mastered. "I think I may be ahead," he says with confidence.



READING CLASS: *Fifth-graders (l. to r.) Sandra Fister, Khong Beng Siong, Chantaphone Kinghila, teacher Troy Locke, Menpreak Oum, Leandra Pina.*

CONCERN FOR NEIGHBORHOOD YOUTH PROMPTED PRINCIPAL TO START SCHOOL

PROVIDENCE, R.I.

■ "My children are the fourth generation of my family to be born in southwestern Providence," says Daniel Corley, who founded the Community Preparatory School in this poor section of the city eight years ago.

The rest of Mr. Corley's family moved out of the area long ago. But Corley has no plans to move north or east into wealthier parts of the city. "It would be giving up," he says simply.

He did recently move within the neighborhood, however: Corley, his wife, and two children now live next door to the local soup kitchen rather than a bar.

Community Prep grew out of Corley's concern for the young students in the neighborhood. He wasn't willing to give up on them. "Kids would come hang out in my yard, and I would help them with academics," he says.

He and the neighbors began discussing the lack of effective middle-school education in the city. "People would actually move out of Providence when their child became middle-school age," Corley says.

He and his wife were just beginning to start a family of their own, and Corley decided it was time to establish a school in the neighborhood. But Corley's daughter Ruth didn't start attending Community Prep until this year — as a sixth-grader.

"We have a rule here that students have to really want to go to school here," Corley says. Up until this year, Ruth chose to remain at the local public school with her friends.

— L. S. W.



LEARNING

ENGROSSED: *Fifth-grader Khong Beng Siong at Community Prep.*

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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WHITE OAK, MARYLAND

School Reform, 83 Kids at a Time

By DAN CORLEY
And ROBERT W. HAHN

As Republicans take control of Congress and most of the governors' offices, they must soon decide how to approach the nation's crisis in education. They will find a clue to what works—not only on paper but in real life—in inner-city “alternative” schools that outperform public schools.

One such alternative is Community Preparatory School in Providence, R.I. To date, 100% of its students have been accepted into college preparatory high schools, and 86% of its college-age alumni are pursuing degrees—more than twice the urban public-school average. Yet the cost per student is no more than that of Rhode Island's public schools.

Community Prep is not your average school. It is an independent middle school (grades four through eight) we founded 10 years ago for inner-city youths whose parents felt their children's needs were not being met by public schools.

We started the school because we both had experienced problems in educating students in the public schools, particularly because of the system's bureaucratic inflexibility and unwillingness to experiment with new approaches. Fresh out of college, we were idealistic enough to think that we could create an educational alternative that would enable inner-city students to enjoy learning and develop a positive attitude.

The school began with meetings with local parents and community leaders. Far from being apathetic, many parents of the inner-city youngsters we hoped to educate expressed a willingness to sacrifice time and money to send their children to a school that would challenge them personally and academically.

Initially, only a handful of community leaders were willing to lend their support. Some did not want to support the school until it was a demonstrated success. Others expressed concern that the school would shift the business community's attention away from the public schools.

Despite these concerns, the school gained enough support to open in 1984 with 25 students in three rented classrooms. In 1987, with an enrollment of 54, it moved into part of the local YMCA. And when these quarters became cramped, trustees raised money to purchase and renovate a former parochial school in the heart of the city's poorest neighborhood.

Today, there are 83 students. Almost half are African-American, 20% are white, and the remainder are primarily Hispanic and Southeast Asian. The median family income is \$22,500.

How does a school successfully challenge and develop such an at-risk student body? Community Prep does it by promoting flexibility, instilling values and involving parents.

Flexibility enables teachers to devise their own innovative approaches. For example, teachers found they could improve both verbal and math skills by having students write the solutions to math problems in words.

Flexibility also allows teachers to take advantage of unforeseen learning opportunities. Six years ago, teachers saw a chance to help acclimate deaf students to the hearing world and to teach hearing students about a different culture and language. The result was a partnership with the Rhode Island School for the Deaf. Today, many Community Prep students are fluent in American Sign Language, as friendship and teamwork have overcome communication barriers.

However, as teacher Cathy Jacques points out, “All the teaching in the world isn't worth a hill of beans without values.” So the school not only teaches reading, writing and arithmetic, it also emphasizes a fourth “R”: respect.

As students learn respect for different cultures, religions and ways of communicating, they also learn the value of hard work and self-respect. Students begin each day by reciting the pledge written by inner-city educator Marva Collins: “This day has been given to me fresh and clear. I can either use it or throw it away. I promise that I shall use this day to the fullest, realizing that it can never come back again. I realize that this is my life to use or to throw away.”

To teach the value of serving others, students collectively are required to contribute about 2,500 hours of community service each year. They have worked in neighborhood soup kitchens, helped the elderly write their autobiographies, read to preschool children in day care, made beds at a homeless shelter and cared for animals at the local zoo.

This sense of community actually starts at home, with parents taking on responsibilities that are not expected in other schools. Parents assist with school activities, fund raising and administration. Every family shows its commitment by paying at least part of the tuition cost, or by working for tuition credits at the school.

Most important, parents are involved in their children's education. Parents and teachers meet regularly. Families—the parent and child—sit down quarterly with the child's teacher to set goals, a process at the heart of Community Prep education. The result is a contract—a goal and a plan—that has personal meaning to the child and is fully supported at home and at school.

Defenders of public school education have criticized this model on the grounds that the school “cream-skims” its students. This critique is unfounded for two reasons. First, it ignores the fact that public schools often place their best students in gifted programs—true cream-skimming.

Second, while the school does screen students, the range of achievement on standardized tests for entering students at Community Prep begins in the 40th percentile, hardly the cream. Nor are these children from affluent families. More than 90% receive financial aid.

A decade after Community Prep started, the American education system is finally becoming more flexible. There are a growing number of innovative public and private options for educating at-risk youth, and a growing number of public schools that are being run by private firms and nonprofits—an idea that was unthinkable only a few years ago.

The idea of increasing parental involvement in education is also gaining favor with the political establishment. Education Secretary Richard Riley recently released a study called “Strong Families, Strong Schools,” which agrees that we need to rethink the roles that parents can and should play in educating our children.

The message from this impending education revolution is clear. Public education can be changed for the better by creating alternatives that beat the status quo. In other words, in education, as in other areas, competition can work wonders. When GOP governors and legislators across the nation focus on the education crisis, that is one of the first lessons they need to master.

Mr. Corley is a co-founder and executive director of Community Preparatory School. Mr. Hahn is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a co-founder of the school.

Minority Students Find Hope in Private School

By VICTORIA WHITE

Special to The New York Times

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — At an upstart private school here, there are no lush green playing fields sporting finely tailored teams. The number of personal computers would evoke envy in only the poorest of public schools.

Yet in the unlikely setting of a handful of rented rooms in a downtown Y.M.C.A. building, the Community Preparatory School is turning heads because instead of being another bastion of privilege it is a beacon of prom-

ise for bright elementary schoolchildren from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Daniel Corley, a Providence teacher, and Robert W. Hahn, a member of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, founded Community Prep five years ago for academically gifted children, who are admitted regardless of ability to pay. While a handful of the 64 students at the school were charged the full \$3,300 annual tuition, three-quarters are attending for less than half that, and some pay less than \$500. More than \$200,000 of the \$267,000 budget this school year comes from corporate grants, individual donations and a small subsidy.

'They're Joining That Ladder'

"They've targeted 4th to 8th grade so they can get scholarships at prep schools and then move on," said Liz Cheng, a television producer at WCVB-TV in Boston who helps raise money for the school. "They're joining that ladder as opposed to being left behind."

All nine students who have so far graduated from Community Prep are pursuing college-bound programs of study. With substantial financial aid, four are attending prep schools.

Classes are kept small, with academic programs tailored to the individual, and the classwork is demanding. On standardized tests, students have averaged a two-year growth in reading skills and a three-year growth in mathematics skills for each year they are at Community Prep.

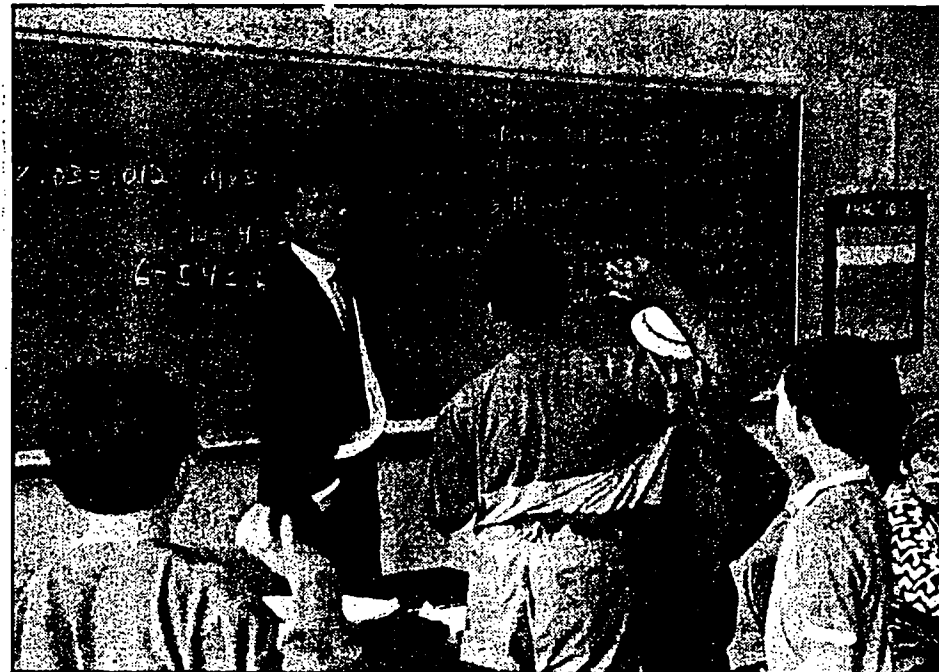
The goal is a solid foundation that will put the child on the track toward a good college. On a larger scale, Mr. Corley hopes the school can become a model for teaching inner-city students around the nation.

"There's a great need, a crying need in independent schools in this country at the secondary level for minority students who are ready to step in and actively join in better education," said Mr. Corley, who for 13 years taught in Rhode Island public, private and parochial schools. He teaches mathematics at the school as well as serving as its executive director.

Nancy Fain, a trustee at Community Prep, said, "He's chosen this age range because it's these kids who have traditionally fallen through the cracks in the public school system in Rhode Island."

Desire to Learn Required

The Community Prep difference is articulated at the beginning of each school day. A chorus of voices still creaky with childhood recite this pledge, written by Marva Collins, an educator who has helped inner-city schoolchildren in Chicago: "This day has been given to me fresh and clear. I can either use it or throw it away. I promise that I shall use this day to the



The New York Times/Lark Spatt

Daniel Corley, the executive director of the Community Preparatory School in Providence, R.I., teaching a math class at the school. The school,

which was founded five years ago, admits academically gifted children from a wide variety of backgrounds regardless of their ability to pay tuition.

fullest, realizing that it can never come back again. I realize that this is my life to use or to throw away."

With that they are off for another day of classes in the school, which demands not only a willingness to work and learn but also an active desire to do so at Community Prep.

To be admitted, a student must take an entrance examination and show above-average intelligence in at least one academic area, Mr. Corley said. "And the student has to say, 'I want to go there,'" he said. "If the student says, 'I don't want to go here, my parents are trying to make me,' then I said, 'You're set; you don't have to come.'"

As at other schools, students are divided into grade levels, but here they are given wide latitude to work at their own pace. A math class, for example, may be made up mostly of fifth graders but include several fourth and sixth graders who also happen to work at the same level. Dozens of volunteers, many of them education students at Brown University, make it possible for a class of 15 to be divided occasionally into two or three groups.

Diversity Includes Deaf Pupils

The school year is divided into five terms. At the beginning of each the student meets with his parents and teachers to set goals and write a realistic plan for achieving those goals. "The plan can be very basic," Mr. Corley

Ability to pay does not matter at the Rhode Island school.

said. "I will have breakfast before I come into school. I will do my homework when I get home, or after supper but before the television is turned on." These are things that affect someone's learning.

Involving parents in their children's education is a high priority. "It's just obvious that if the parents and teachers work together, the student is going to do better," Mr. Corley said.

With an array of pushpins pressed into a map of Providence, he graphically displays the cultural mix at Community Prep. Many pins are clustered in the poorer areas of the city. There are 22 yellow pins for the 22 white students, 24 blue pins representing the black students, 10 red pins for the Southeast Asian students and 8 green pins for the students of Hispanic and other ethnic backgrounds. Buddhists, Roman Catholics, evangelicals and traditional Protestants, Muslims and Jews are at the school.

In general, the atmosphere here is, the more different you are the more

wonderful you are," said Debbie Wheeler, director of volunteers at the school. Mrs. Wheeler's son Joey is one of six deaf students who have come here from the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, which provides teachers as their interpreters at Community Prep. "Because of their attitude, the kids have thrived here," Mrs. Wheeler said of Community Prep. "My son is a straight A student. To be deaf and to want to be not in the deaf school and in another school, that says so much about that school I can't even tell you."

'Whole Idea Is Very American'

Eventually, Mr. Corley hopes to expand the school to 150 students without sacrificing its diversity.

"A lot of parents want to educate their children with the public school population," Mr. Corley said. "They like the mix. The whole idea is very American."

If there is a common strand that runs through the background of Community Prep children, it is an untapped eagerness to learn. Anthea Abdullah says her son, Tashied, a fifth grader, was not challenged in the public school he used to attend, but now he is writing research papers and enjoys school.

Through his actions, Tashied bestows on the school perhaps the highest compliment a grade-schooler can give: As his mother said, "He never pretends to be sick so he can stay home, which is different from before."