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## Practitioner's Essay: Reflections of a Chicago Public School Teacher

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**PRACTITIONER'S ESSAY:  
REFLECTIONS OF A CHICAGO  
PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER**

MARILYN BAKER\*

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I genuinely hate that I am writing this anonymously. If there was anything I yearned to do during my year of teaching at Chicago's Denby High School, it was to speak candidly and to stand up for what I believe. Yet, even now, after my departure from the South Side school, I find that I can only do so behind the veil of a pseudonym. Marilyn Baker is not my real name, and Chicago's South Side knows no Denby High School, but what I describe to you are, indeed, my firsthand experiences as a teacher for Chicago Public Schools (CPS). With these descriptions of my first year in CPS, I aim not to bash my particular school, but instead, to highlight the deficiencies in the system that allowed the specific incidents to occur and to expose the injustice that continues to carry on unchecked. While the institution of education is designed to help our youth succeed, develop, and grow as individuals, in some school systems, students are being used as pawns in an administrative, and often political, game of chess, resulting in their needs being overlooked for others' self-interests. As the current educational debate heats up, and as the situation for many urban schools seems increasingly dire, there is great potential for hasty, misguided policies to arise in response. In order to devise effective solutions, policymakers must fully understand the problem. For this reason, I invite you to take a critical look at the unfiltered realities that exist for many of this nation's teachers and students.

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\* Not the author's real name.

While nothing could adequately prepare me for what I encountered in my first year at Denby High School, I believe I may have been better prepared than many others who have blindly entered similar schools. My desire to work in inner-city schools stemmed neither from blind naiveté nor a desire for martyrdom but from a newfound appreciation for the opportunities I had been afforded. Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, I was not entirely unfamiliar with environments like South Side's Denby High. Like a great number of the students I would come to teach, I spent the majority of my childhood and adolescence receiving some form of government assistance. Like many others, my father went to prison, my mother was a single parent, and my family had moved five times by my sixth birthday. On the other hand, while I experienced many of the same housing and family situations that my students did, I was also protected from a number of their realities in critical ways—first and foremost, by the quality of educational opportunities that I was afforded.

Aside from a three-year stint at an elementary school in Oak Park, Michigan (a culturally diverse, low- to middle-income neighboring suburb of Detroit), I attended parochial schools for my entire pre-college education. This opportunity for a quality education was all thanks to my grandparents, who, minus the small portion that my scholarship paid for, covered the entire cost. As a minority student at a predominantly white, mid- to upper-middle class high school that largely ignored the needs of students from economically and racially diverse backgrounds, I became aware of socio-economic marginalization and its effects. Although I knew since grade school that I wanted to teach, I learned in college why it was so important. Through my coursework in a special program for urban and under-resourced schools, I learned about the interplay of economic and educational systems. I gained a greater understanding of the world community and my responsibility to it: my passion for social justice was born.

I originally aspired to teach because I knew I had the energy, the passion, and the skills to make a significant impact on the way my students learned. But now, I also finally understood the sacrifice my grandparents made for my education, and I knew that through teaching I would be investing in the futures of countless others with potential. I experienced firsthand the power of a quality education and its ability to provide life opportunities that may have otherwise been out of reach; so now, with diploma in hand, I reached for CPS.

### I. A RUDE AWAKENING

In the year that I spent teaching at Denby High School, I experienced things on a daily basis that were semantics and rhetoric in college, mere pictures and essays in books. There is an understanding within the field of education that a teacher's first year is a year like no other—much closer to hell than heaven that leaves a lasting impact incomparable to subsequent years. However, what I encountered was far too blatantly unethical to be chalked up to perspective alone. The daily experiences there are difficult to put in words, and I'm not sure I could ever accurately say what transpired on a *typical* day, because the very trademark of my experience there was inconsistency. More revealing, perhaps, is a representative assortment of occurrences that became so commonplace after a while that, even now, it takes effort for me to recognize them as in any way spectacular or notable. Yet, even the seemingly trivial aspects of the day were symptoms of substantial problems within the system. My goal with this essay is to demonstrate the myriad of roadblocks that teachers face when trying to educate our nation's students—roadblocks put in place by national and state policies, school systems, and even the culture within school administrations. So often the rhetoric is simply that America's failing schools are underfunded. They are and that creates immense difficulties in trying to give a student on the South Side an equal education to a student in the suburbs. But simply putting more

funds into these schools will not solve all of the problems. There needs to be a fundamental shift in the administrative mindset in order to put the educational needs of the students ahead of any personal egos, pride, and most importantly, self-interest.

Let us, for example, tackle the seemingly mundane aspect of daily announcements. For a moment, think back to your own high school experience or your current teaching environment. How often do you hear the blast of the Public Announcement (P.A.) system? At what times? How might its overuse impact the learning—or lack thereof—taking place? This alone, when put into the context of what actually needs to go on in a classroom, speaks volumes about the educational climate at the school. To be effective, teachers must do more than just relay information; they must create a classroom environment conducive to learning, maintain student engagement, establish a sense of consistency, and demonstrate the importance of each moment spent in the classroom. At Denby High School, constant interruptions interfered with these objectives. On nearly any given day, a minimum of three announcements were made over the loudspeaker during each 50-minute class period. On many days, announcements for a single class period numbered in the double digits. Imagine trying to build students' excitement for gerunds and participles, and just when you have finally gotten most of them on board, you are disrupted by:

“Mrs. Adams, it is now fifth period. Please report to your class. Mrs. Adams, your class is waiting for you.”

As you finish your sentence and ask your students a question to make sure they are still with you, you hold your tongue for:

“All students should now be in their fifth period classes. The bell rang five minutes ago and class should have begun. It is important that all students report to their classes at the scheduled time. If any students are in the hallway after the bell, they will receive in-school suspensions.”

Students roll their eyes and look away because this is the fourteenth time they have heard that ineffective speech this month, and few in-school suspensions are ever issued, let alone followed through. Those who had planned on answering have either forgotten their comment or no longer want to bother. So now you must try in vain for the next 40 minutes to string along those who you manage to get back on track despite the subsequent announcements:

“Anyone who is trying to make a phone call in the downstairs office with the phone in the back, please note that the phone will be serviced this afternoon and may not be working.”

*[15 minutes later]* “The phones downstairs are still not working. I repeat the phones are still not working. This was referring to the phones in the downstairs office in the back that weren’t working before . . . the other phones in the office do still work, and you may use those. We will let you know when the broken phones have been fixed and turned back on . . . thank you.”

“Mary Taylor, Sharon Wilson . . . (the principal names 15 more students) . . . and Anthony Bailey, please report to room 206.”

*[Moments later]* “Will student X, student Y, student Z, please join them?”

*[And then 2 minutes later]* “Students P, Q, R, S . . . will be returning to class, I repeat . . . .”

*[And so on . . . ]*

“The bell will soon be ringing for the end of fifth period. I want to remind all students to please move quickly to your next period class. It is important for you to be in class on time. We will be ringing the bell shortly, and you will have four minutes to get to your next class.”

On days when we were most frustrated—or managed to muster up some disbelief (a rare commodity after a while)—my fellow teachers and I kept tallies either to validate our frustration or to genuinely confirm that these occurrences were not distorted figments of our imaginations. Although the immediate ramifications of the interruptions were their effects on classroom learning, the mentality that underlies the interruptions points to greater, more systematic barriers to creating a genuinely productive learning environment. The frequent announcements served as tools of obedience of both the teachers and the students to specifically administrative concerns. But to foster a true learning environment, both teachers and students must have some sense of autonomy from the administration. Far too often, it seemed that the administration would prefer us to act as babysitters than teachers—an administrative preference that was widely understood by students and faculty alike.

The biggest difficulty in pointing to any single solution to the challenges experienced in failing school systems is that the problems are interrelated. It is hard to know where to begin and even harder to imagine an isolated improvement making any real dent in the larger scheme of things. Most of the other problems at the school had multiple causes and effects as well. Overall, there were three main issues at play within my CPS school: competing agendas, lack of organization, and poor communication.

### *Competing Agendas*

Competing agendas meant that the administration's desire for funding (only received if enough bodies were in the classrooms) and preservation was often in direct conflict with the teachers' desire to create productive, effective, and exciting learning environments. Despite the official school rule that students should not be permitted to come to class late, barring exceptional circumstances, security guards and administrators routinely inter-

rupted in-progress classes to insert late students. Actions like these not only disrupted the progress of the class but also directly undermined teachers' authority, weakening their ability to enforce personal standards and school policies in the future. If a student was harassing another student, or was constantly interfering with the lesson, and I had them removed from the classroom, it completely undermined my teaching goals for the day if that student was returned to class ten minutes later. Although situations like these occurred more out of blind disregard for the teachers' needs and objectives than out of deliberate malice, their classroom rules, ideals, and educational goals were trampled on by the administration. In addition, there was great inconsistency about when "official" rules were enforced or overruled. Responses largely depended on the specific students involved, how crowded in-school suspension was that day, and notably, whether visitors were in the building.

Overall, it was quite simple and glaringly apparent: the administration's agenda and priorities trumped ours every time. They needed teachers at individualized education plan (IEP) meetings, needed faculty members to show their faces at important professional developments, and needed individuals to speak well of them when visitors and officials came inquiring. Fair enough. Yet, when these needs were constantly addressed on a last-minute basis, the students and teachers suffered the repercussions. When a group of principals from neighborhood "feeder" elementary schools came to inspect the school's academic offerings, to determine whether it was a worthwhile choice for their students, my colleagues and I were pulled away from our classes with less than fifteen minutes' notice. It didn't matter that we were trying to finish our units with the students, helping them work on papers, or preparing them for upcoming tests. We were expected to do whatever was asked—even if it meant being less than truthful—because the school needed to keep up appearances in order to keep our funding. If that meant



ignoring the educational needs of some students, that was a cost that the administration didn't mind bearing.

### *Lack of Organization*

In general, at Denby High School, the scope of concern was immediate rather than big picture. Among the faculty and administration, there was no common understanding or shared set of objectives, let alone any agreement on what it would take to accomplish them. Most people worked in isolation or in isolated groups. With competing agendas and lack of organization, teachers were often kept out of the loop. Whether intentional or inadvertent, these obstacles to information exchange decreased our efficiency. Without a master plan, the focus turned to getting through the next period and getting over the next obstacle. Information was overwhelmingly incomplete and was communicated in an untimely manner and in inappropriate forums. My colleagues and I were asked to sit on the aforementioned information panel for the feeder school principals only minutes before it was scheduled to begin. Had we been told a week, or even a few days, in advance, we might have been able to plan more effectively and not let our students bear the brunt of administrative disorganization and miscommunication. The fact that we were told at the last minute exemplifies that the administration was more concerned with its self-interest than with the educational needs of the students.

The earlier case of the announcements is another prime example. With the administrators addressing deadlines and requirements so close to the last minute, the P.A. system became their primary means of disseminating information. Whether intended for one person or one hundred, announcements boomed into every classroom indiscriminately, despite their irrelevance, redundancy, or lack of clarity. The overwhelming majority of these announcements were things that could have (and should have) been taken care of with proper preparation (i.e. memos, once-

daily announcements, timely emails or postings). While most things were at least somewhat necessary or somewhat time-sensitive, administrators often exacerbated matters beyond what was necessary, simply because they had waited too long in the first place to handle the situations. With everyone flying by the seats of their pants, it became difficult to plan ahead or even meet the challenges that arose. Eventually, teachers stopped trying to come up with complex lessons, feeling that they might get ruined anyway.

### *Poor Communication*

In any situation where multiple people are forced to collaborate, it takes effort and cooperation to come to a common understanding and achieve a common goal. While it may have been inevitable that not everyone would be on the same page about their collective purpose, the problem never had a chance to be fixed because there were no avenues to explore or bridge that difference. Like in many other failing schools, communication went in a single direction. Input and commentary were given to teachers, but teachers were not permitted or encouraged to give it to the administration. Therefore, edicts were handed down from the administration with little regard to their incompatibility with the teachers' goals or existing procedure. Even when teachers tried to create a classroom culture suitable for learning, there were often things beyond their control (yet in the power of the administration) that adversely affected their ability to achieve success. This lack of support and ineffective communication ultimately leads to decreased teacher investment.

## **II. LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE**

When politicians and policy makers decide they want "accountability" from public schools, they often assign responsibility on failing schools to the teachers within those schools. While

in the teaching profession, as in all fields of work, there are undoubtedly individual workers who have lost their enthusiasm or may have been better suited to some other profession, I believe most teachers truly want to succeed and provide the best education possible to their students. Likewise, most of my students seemed to want to succeed as well. If everyone has the drive and determination, what are the forces that are preventing success? Perhaps neither the teachers nor the students knew how to translate their efforts into success at a school like Denby High. None of our previous experiences had adequately prepared us to reach success there. Even if we had been prepared, I'm not sure that all of us knew what success looked like at Denby High School. Actions spoke louder than words. Despite the administration talking a good talk about what our students could and should accomplish, it was clear that the administration expected very little from the student body. With nothing to strive for and no goal worth trying to achieve, most students felt that Denby High School was more of an obstacle than a stepping stone to success.

So what do you do when you're a teacher stuck in this situation? Many of my colleagues at Denby High School were invested in the students and had good ideas and potential solutions to help our students achieve. However, most suggestions were disregarded by the school administration, and we encountered their resistance when we tried to implement these plans on our own. To further complicate things, office politics, the culture of fear created by layoffs and school closings, and knowing that one's fellow colleagues would likely bear the brunt of any repercussions, deterred most teachers from pursuing change. How do you become a muckraker when your job forces you to create the muck? Why be a whistleblower if you don't feel that you will be heard? I never uttered a word to the superintendent or mayor because my better sense of judgment overwhelmed me into silence. How does one speak of things that are illegal, unethical, and corrupt without implicating the people

who did them? How does one expose those people without fear of retaliation? What happens to the students who were passed without even doing a quarter of the work for the semester? What about me, who passed some of them because of the half-mandate, half-mantra of the principal and department head that “you cannot fail freshmen”? The focus had long ago shifted from excelling to getting by; *good enough* became the standard to live by. With low standards on one side and lack of administrative support on the other, many teachers became disillusioned.

Can you imagine going home night after night to plan lessons and pore over papers to give adequate feedback, and then have administrators change the grades that you gave your students? Why would teachers want to bother to help students earn an A? Why would students bother to adhere to expectations if they knew that they could lower the bar simply by holding out another few weeks? I am not oblivious to extenuating circumstances, nor do I deny that many students have numerous daily difficulties that impede their abilities to perform consistently, whole-heartedly, and accurately; however, that is not the case in the majority of situations involving low-performance. Even if it were, in so many instances at my school, the excuse seemed to precede the faulty action. The demands and actions of the administration, paired with the blind compliance of veteran teachers, created a sense of pressure on new teachers. We were pressured to accept, as a given, that students would not complete work up to the standards. Grade manipulation became commonplace, if not expected and encouraged. The school administration, while possibly intending to help the students by not failing them and giving them more chances to prove themselves, ended up with the opposite effect. Because it was expected that students would miss inordinate numbers of assignments, “makeup work packages” actually become a required entrée on the academic menu. Here’s how a common manifestation of the “makeup work package” played out:

**Teacher:** I see you didn't turn in assignment a, b, c, d . . . ? Well, I see you've done x, y, and z, and because you've at least taken the quiz, I see that you tried to do something. So even though you know I should fail you, here's what I'll do. Take this four-page makeup package and get it in to me, and we'll see if we can get you a D.

*[after deadline passes and student hasn't turned it in]*

**Teacher** (becoming slightly more frustrated): Ok, well then what have you completed thus far? Well, see if you can do two more sections on that page . . . you knew you had all week for this.

*[after extension deadline passes and still no package]*

**Teacher** (now exasperated and trying to rationalize the principal's mandate of not failing this student): Well, at least he bothered to pick up a makeup work package, and most of it is complete, although not necessarily correct, but hey, he's done more than half of the class, so I guess he deserves to pass.

Can the students be expected to abide by rules, standards, and expectations that the faculty and administration do not themselves uphold or seem to care about? Students were not held to a reachable ideal; in fact, the bar was lowered to meet them. Teachers began to cope rather than strive for change as maintenance of the fundamentals became a more practical priority.

For years, Denby High School's enrollment had been declining, dropout rates climbing, and failure rates remaining high. In response, the principal often changed students' grades on their transcripts. That is, to avoid reprimands and investigation from the school board, to dodge the looming threat of closure and restructuring, and to reduce negative appraisal by feeder ele-

mentary schools, our principal changed many Fs to Ds without consulting or even informing the teachers. Somewhere between two assistant principals and one principal, attendance records were altered and fabricated *en masse*, allowing the school to receive more money for a higher body count, while preventing teachers from challenging the plausibility of the changed grades.

Although many of the students who earned failing grades did so because they simply were not attending class regularly, once attendance records were changed, there was no way of proving that the students were not there. Again, how can teachers expect to motivate students to try when credit assignments become arbitrary? The recipients of inflated or falsified grades have no reason to believe they need to exert any more effort in the future to get a repeated result, and many of them brag about having done nothing yet still having passed. Students who actually do attempt to rise to the expectations become frustrated and disillusioned, either believing that their true efforts go unnoticed or unappreciated or growing tired of others' unearned grades making a mockery of their effort. In fact, we were actually told that we "couldn't" fail students who showed up every day, even if they did absolutely nothing in class. If teachers aren't allowed to fail students who show up almost every day (which is not a good policy to begin with), when attendance records are changed, teachers have no idea who those students are, leading, again, to the futility of grading and holding someone to that grade. We were constantly caught in a web of interrelated catch-22s; it became increasingly harder to believe that it wasn't at least partially by design. Forcing people to comply with, or to turn a blind eye to, illegal and fraudulent activities served as a pretty good way to keep them from being quick, or likely, to report anything. Thus, the actual education of the students was secondary to the administrators' own self-interest and sense of self-preservation, and it became obvious that at the end of the day, the administration at Denby High School did not care whether the students actually learned anything.

Not only was the objective of learning secondary at Denby High School, but the administration also took advantage of a marginalized student body in procedural aspects as well. An associate principal actually boasted in a faculty meeting about illegally expelling a student. This, the assistant principal reminded us, was because he was so dedicated to trying to “look out for” his teachers. This same assistant principal sidestepped proper protocol and compromised a student’s rights when he neglected to follow up with a school security guard’s assault on a student.

On a regular basis, we were asked or expected to feign support for things that we didn’t believe in, to try to explain what eluded us, or to make excuses for something we found despicable. When students inquired about actions that I, too, found puzzling, unjust, or counter-productive, I could entertain their discussion only within certain bounds without having to worry about repercussions. When I was asked to sit on information panels, to compose a presentation for incoming eighth-graders and to field questions posed by parents, officials, and other outside guests, I was expected to say whatever was necessary to assuage their concerns. The year that I spent at Denby High School, the school’s accreditation was under review, and as a result, each teacher was required to fill out a survey appraising various aspects of the school program. Before the accreditation board arrived, the teachers selected for the representative panel were required to attend two-hour long after-school meetings during which they were not only told what to say, but actually made to take part in a mock panel during which the administrators asked potential questions. When teachers gave their responses, the administrators and veteran teachers coached respondents on how to improve their answers. We were not to leave until we got it right.

I remember being incredulous about this process, which defeated the purpose of a candid, randomly chosen panel. The accreditation board wanted to know the truth, but the school made certain that the teachers would give only their pre-ap-

proved version of the truth. I felt trapped and disgusted at being an accomplice to the fraud. After the preparation session, I talked things over with another first-year teacher whom I had come to trust. Throughout the year, we had discussed the problems that we experienced and observed on a daily basis, remarking that if anyone ever knew the truth, the school would most certainly be shut down or restructured, giving our students a better shot at a decent education elsewhere. We now felt sick that we were not only standing idly by while being robbed of a voice, but we were being asked to paint flowers and rainbows over what disgusted us most. We would not be able to tell the whole truth on those panels any more than an abused child can tell an investigator how she *really* got that black eye when the guilty parent hovers nearby. The presence of Big Brother administrators was felt even in their absence. Even our fellow teachers would not be useful allies, as most had gotten used to the drill and found it easier to play along.

Unfortunately, teachers were not the only parties coerced into spewing falsehoods. Before the accreditation board came, students were hand-selected, then taken out of their classes for multiple days in a row to practice their responses to questions. During first period one day, a student was poring over note cards during group discussions. Assuming she was studying for an upcoming test in another subject, I approached her and asked her to put it away. She responded by explaining that the assistant principal told her that whatever she needed to do was fine, so long as she could remember what she needed to say. At the end of the class, she asked me to take the cards and quiz her to see how perfectly she could parrot the answer. I was appalled and saddened because I knew these were not her ideas or her words. I knew she did not believe these things, because she often complained to me about, or criticized some of, the very things listed as positives. Other complaints were completely absent. The administrators had led her to believe that selection for this role was an honor, and that if she did it well, it would be a



testament to her talent and intelligence and that the experience would really help her get somewhere. This student was being used.

While I speak mainly of negative experiences in this essay, I am not a jaded teacher by any means. In fact, my decision to leave Denby High School was made with considerable reluctance despite the many negative aspects of my experience. Even at the end of my first year, I could acknowledge the positive aspects of my time at Denby High School. I loved, and genuinely cared for, my students. Yes, they were imperfect, but so was I. No, they did not always listen, and yes, there were days when I would have rather torn my hair out than teach another day. But despite their intermittent displays of displaced anger and frustration about their daily experiences, I think they may have held up better than I did—possibly, and sadly, because the incidents that floored and incensed me was what most had gotten used to or come to expect.

For far too many, their prior experiences in CPS had trained them to accept what I found horrifying, unjust, and heartbreaking; as a result, many of them had long ago stopped resisting. Countless students showed unparalleled strength in dealing with heartbreaking issues outside of school that few people could believe, let alone endure. No, they did not always handle it well, and often times, I had to field angry questions and inquiries that I didn't know the answer to and was expected to soothe them with words that I did not have. My heart is still with these students for whom I almost stayed through another year of emotional torture, ubiquitous futility, and potential career suicide. It is for their sake that I write this. In my one year, I experienced tremendous heartbreak, frustration, and defeat; I would have continued to do so if I had not realized that the boat was sinking far faster than my thimble, and other teachers' Dixie cups, could manage to scoop out the water. Still, I would have continued to kick if I hadn't realized that the rescue boats were so far out of reach that I would almost certainly drown before they found me

and that if the waves managed to finally overtake me, it would take little less than a miracle to revive the teacher I had hoped to be.

I do still teach, now in the Detroit area, and I enjoy my job very much. As for Denby High School, I recently attended my former CPS school's Homecoming game to show my support for the cheerleading team that I used to coach. My former students, and others in similar schools across the country, deserve a better educational experience than they are receiving. My experiences in CPS impacted me in so many ways, and I can only imagine the ways that the youth of this country are being affected by what they encounter and endure in the course of their educational careers. What I recognize from having now worked in four different schools is that each school needs to be looked at individually. One must look at the specific dynamics, assets, and challenges of a particular school in order to help it and its students succeed. If students, teachers, and administrators do not feel that success can be reached, then it inevitably cannot. I have seen many good teachers quit because they could no longer cope with the frustrations, and I have seen many others cave in and reduce their standards rather than put all of their effort into something that would almost certainly be thwarted. Students tend to follow the same logic: they quit and cave in as soon as they feel that what they do does not make a difference.

If policymakers are interested in effective change, they must stop trying to make one size fit all, and instead, figure out what is preventing success from being "worth it" at each school. I hope that I have contributed to the impetus toward a much-needed dialogue about what is going on in current school systems and helping people think about where to direct their efforts. It is time for policy makers to stop turning a blind eye to ineffective schools and take note of what is actually transpiring both behind school walls and within school systems.

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