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*I'LL SHOW YOU MINE,
IF YOU SHOW ME YOURS*
*A Brief and Preliminary Examination
of Parental Report Cards*

ROBERT P. ENGVALL

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This article examines the recently introduced phenomenon of parental report cards, taking a preliminary look at some of the reasons, both real and perceived, behind the concept. Increased parental involvement in the education of children is as universally applauded as apple pie and motherhood. Educators and parent-teacher organizations have, for years, encouraged greater involvement on the part of parents—encouragement that in the past seldom ventured beyond simple and generic letters from a principal or superintendent or, in some instances, a more personalized letter from a teacher. Parents have long been urged, but have never actually been required, to participate in their children's education. Although the time has not yet come for compulsory parental education and/or actual report cards assessing the amount of commitment parents show toward their children's education, symbolic report cards have begun to appear, in which parents are asked to assess their own performance as parents.

More and higher standards . . . greater accountability . . . rigorous, even high-stakes testing . . . these are the new buzzwords surrounding American education. Many people seem to think that having high standards and testing them rigorously will lead to higher educational achievement, especially among our most disadvantaged (usually urban) children. In sum, the new mainstream arguments submit that by holding schools generally, and teachers particularly, accountable for students' success, there will be steady improvement in achievement. Would that it were so. Empirical evidence suggesting that higher standards and more testing will inevitably lead to higher achievement is sketchy at best (Apple, 2001). Contrary evidence suggesting that such policies tend to further exacerbate class and race stratification has all too easily been dismissed by policy makers and media outlets.

The collective rhetoric seems sound, for after all and on the surface, what's not to like about higher standards and increased accountability? This article examines whether rhetoric concerning expectations of increased

accountability on the part of others (those in control of the schools) matches, even in a small way, the expectations and/or standards that we set for ourselves.

There can be little doubt that we actually know significantly less about how and why children learn than we often pretend. The influence that parents have on the learning that their children do has been subject to various interpretations. The influence that parents have in encouraging their children to read, study, and think can hardly be questioned. That some parents are better at encouraging their children to engage in learning than are some other parents is also indisputable. That some children simply carry with them an innate interest in learning and that others have significantly less of an interest is, again, a simple fact. How is this so? Why is this so? Might parents do a better job of assisting their children in the learning process? Might parents do a better job of interacting with teachers and school administrators concerning their children's learning? Parents are increasingly concerned about the responsibilities of the school, with some of these concerns having entered the political arena. Advocates of prayer in schools, as well as other organized parental rights organizations, have pressed for statutes and constitutional amendments that would carve into law the rights of parents to "control" the education of their children (see Salomone, 2000). If parents want schools to accede power to parents, then what responsibility will parents owe schools?

Remember when presidential candidate Michael Dukakis (Alters, 1988) suggested that we might bring down the national debt if we simply hired more Internal Revenue Service agents to collect the taxes that we properly and legally owed? In an era of increased emphasis on personal responsibility and tough love with regard to various individuals within our social systems, perhaps it was time to raise revenue and cure enormous budget deficits not by raising taxes but simply by enforcing existing tax laws. In essence, Dukakis was seemingly suggesting that we tough-on-crime and law-and-order Americans, ever increasingly upset over crime and ever increasingly willing to build more prisons and hire more police, felt as though we had a God-given right to cheat (at least a bit) on our income taxes. We proclaim that we are honest, virtuous, and brimming with personal responsibility, yet we are determined that our government, whom we hold to a high standard of prosecuting other crimes, should not look too closely at our own endeavors. We are tough on crime, we said, so long as it is other people's crime. Although there were many reasons candidate Dukakis never became President Dukakis, surely his suggestion that we might more closely be monitored by the government was among them.

Remember when President Carter warned us of an impending national energy crisis and the “moral equivalency of war?” He suggested that we conserve energy by driving smaller cars, wearing sweaters in the winter, and turning lights out when we left a room. His suggestions were every bit as unpopular as were candidate Dukakis’s suggestions that we pay what we owed to the federal government. In essence, the lessons that might be learned from these experiences have not been lost on politicians of this era, who suggest that rather than conserving energy (one might look at the public statements of Vice President Cheney during his first 6 months in office), we find more resources and that rather than pay our taxes out of some sort of national obligation, we lower our tax burden that the “evil and bloated” government has placed on us. Perhaps these lessons in our own expectations can be helpful as we examine parental involvement in our children’s education. We are, no doubt, excellent and caring parents. Just do not look too closely and we will of course fulfill our obligations, so long as you diminish them.

More Americans than ever lament the present state of our public schools, and we are very willing to challenge the abilities of teachers who teach our children. We expect teachers to be held more accountable for both perceived and very real failures of our schools, and increasing majorities of us not coincidentally support tougher entrance requirements for beginning teachers and continued competency testing. In such an environment, it would seem to be only basic fairness that we might hold ourselves to higher standards as well. We have not yet reached a time in which entrance requirements for parenting have been considered, but we may well be close to a time in which some type of competency testing of parents with school-age children might be on the horizon. Such testing could take the form of parental report cards. Just as concerns abound about standardized testing of students (see, among others, Meier, 2000), we must be wary of standardized testing of parents. Is it possible that externally imposed expert judgment is practical in this regard? Is it actually possible to judge parenting? Will our individual biases overwhelm any potential gain that such judging might provide?

One thing of which we can be certain is that disengaged parents are a problem, both for their children and for their children’s schools. Steinberg (1996) estimated, based on student surveys, that fully one fourth of parents are disengaged from their children and their children’s lives and that 30% of parents did not know how their child was doing in school (pp. 118-119). In a 1994 survey conducted for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company by the Lou Harris company, between one fourth and one third of students wished that their parents were more involved in their schoolwork. This same survey

asked parents to judge both themselves and other parents, and those findings were even more disturbing than the results of the questions put to the students. In sum, one half of the parents thought that the majority of other parents (not themselves, of course) left their children alone too much, took too little interest in their education, failed to motivate their children to do well in school, and failed to discipline their children adequately (Steinberg, 1996, pp. 119-120).

Like so many things, parental involvement is best when done well and in moderation and is worst when done poorly and/or to excess. When done well, parental involvement in schooling enables parents and their children to develop a common language and to fully integrate the relationship for students between their parents (their primary internal influence) and their schooling (their primary external influence). When done poorly, as Casanova (1996) has cautioned, there can be undesirable excesses on the part of parents both individually and as part of organized groups, with negative consequences for students, teachers, and the greater school community. Still, the concept of parental involvement has been largely romanticized in the popular and academic press, and its endorsement as a fundamental component of successful schooling largely cuts across political and ideological lines.

Extensive literature exists on parental involvement in schooling, with the brunt of it coming down squarely in its favor as a critical factor in ensuring student success (for a substantial list of citations, see Fan, 2001). In her study, Fan (2001) found that parental involvement consisted of several different dimensions, not all of which had positive effects. Parents' "education aspiration for their children" had a consistently positive effect on students' academic growth, whereas parents' volunteering within the schools had less consistent results and parental contact with school (most often in the form of registering a complaint and/or a concern) actually had a negative effect on students' performance (Fan, 2001, p. 56). The finding that "education aspiration for their children" had a positive effect on performance was deemed to be plausibly the result of such aspirations' being translated into a variety of educationally beneficial activities and behaviors during a child's life. Our knowledge of the chicken and egg phenomenon comes into play yet again, as we might wonder whether parents have higher aspirations for their children because their children are already performing well academically or whether these higher aspirations have affected that success.

Berliner and Biddle (1995) ably expressed the principle of parental involvement:

Schooling in America can be improved by strengthening ties between communities and their schools. Such ties can be promoted through programs that

encourage more active roles for parents, more contacts between parents and teachers, and expanded visions for the responsibilities of schools. (p. 328)

When schools are more involved with their communities and when teachers and parents see one another and talk with one another more often, they are more likely to know about one another's needs and are better able to work in tandem to promote the learning and welfare of students (p. 329). "Teachers need parents, therefore the partnership idea combines teachers' expertise in child development and curriculum with parents' expertise about their own children" (de Carvalho, 2001, p. 1). Having said that, teachers do want parents to respect and defer to their professional expertise. The line that separates positive and constructive parental involvement from intrusive and insulting involvement can be a fairly narrow and tenuous one. Kohn (1998a) has written of a tendency on the part of some parents, particularly affluent parents, to involve themselves in their children's schooling in a detrimental and purely selfish manner. Parents must realize that it is the school's goal that all children learn, not simply that their children learn. Within the education community, there is no great desire to enhance parent influence over important education policies and practices. Participation in a child's education by helping out with homework and/or supporting the PTA is one thing, but there is a strong belief on the part of many educators that education is properly conceived and carried out by those who know best (Moe, 2001). Despite these beliefs on the part of educators, 73% of public school parents believe that parents ought to have more influence over the schools than they do now (Moe, 2001, p. 66). Although the desire to positively influence education is often present, there is usually no real mechanism in place that might allow parents, teachers, and administrators to first understand each other's needs and then to collaborate with and help one another address those needs in an integrated and coordinated way. Comer, Haynes, and Joyner (1996) described such a lack of any collaborative mechanism as almost certainly leading to fragmentation, duplication of effort, frustration, blaming, and a host of other ills that combined to lessen the effectiveness of schools in general and urban schools particularly.

In urban settings, in which schools are often large and rather impersonal places, it is perhaps too simple for teachers to assume that uninvolved parents are uncaring parents. Often, those parents whom educators most want to see are those individuals who themselves may have been poor students or who were considered troublesome. Reliving their own negative experiences by walking through the schoolhouse door may be an act of courage not fully understood by many teachers. Reaching out to parents whose educational experiences have been largely positive is undoubtedly much easier than

reaching out to parents whose individual educational experiences were significantly less so. The difficulty in reaching out to parents and seeking greater parental involvement is particularly acute in urban areas. U.S. Department of Education numbers report that 30% of all inner-city students live in poverty, compared with 18% of students living outside the inner city. Compounding the difficulty of poverty, urban districts generally enroll a far greater percentage of limited English proficient students than do nonurban school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Involving parents in a child's education, often difficult in the best of circumstances, is even more difficult in urban environments in which a myriad of social problems seem to be concentrated.

Increased numbers of single parents in poverty (usually single mothers) also is an obstacle that is faced by teachers and administrators seeking increased parental involvement. Single parents are not necessarily less involved with their children's education, but the very fact that many policies and institutions stigmatize and diminish such parents (Bloom, 2001) leads to an understandable reluctance on the part of many in these circumstances to effectively partner with teachers and schools. Haynes et al. (1996) described this reluctance as based, in part at least, on parents' feelings of inadequacy and insecurities based on their own past educational experiences. Even if parents can overcome significant obstacles and both literally and figuratively enter the schoolhouse door, children themselves may sometimes be reluctant to allow their parents opportunities to pry into their school lives, as school is quite often the place where a young person can begin to define his or her individual personality away from the family (Fried, 1995).

Urban schools, particularly large urban schools, tend to exacerbate the sense of isolation and alienation with which many children, in particular many teenagers, continually struggle. Mandating through the use of parental report cards minimal levels of parental involvement in a child's education might go some distance toward lessening some of the alienation and isolation that students may feel. Limiting the size of schools may go hand in hand with increasing effective parental involvement and improving the overall educational environment. Meier (1996) listed seven reasons she believed that limiting the size of schools in both structure and population was a critical factor in creating a climate and culture conducive to real learning. She cited issues of governance, respect, simplicity, safety, accountability, belonging, and most important for the purposes of this article, parental involvement. Stresses of poverty, insecurity, hurried childhood, peer pressures, and emotional distresses can and do happen in urban, suburban, and rural school settings; such stresses seem particularly acute in large and urban schools in which students may often feel a limited sense of community within the school. Meier (2000)

followed her earlier work with the following quote: "Our schools have grown too distant, too big, too standardized, too uniform, too divorced from their communities, too alienating of young from old and old from young" (p. 13).

Tye (2000) identified the two primary arguments in favor of greater parental involvement. The first, largely strategic argument, concerns the belief that if parents and others were actually closer to schools and understood them better, they would be less inclined to become critics and adversaries (an argument that seems to nicely dovetail with Meier's [1996] assertions that size tends to matter). The second, a more ideological argument, concerns the issue of democracy itself, insofar as parents' voices clearly should be heard. "Excluding them would be antithetical to American values of citizen involvement in the public sphere—which certainly includes the public schools" (Tye, 2000, p. 109). These American values are reflected by Pangle and Pangle (2000), who have interpreted the writings of the founding fathers as pointing toward school systems in which there would be substantial involvement by parents and in which administrations would be keenly sensitive to parental concerns about curriculum, discipline, and pedagogy.

There has been significant research and experience during the past 20 years that have provided compelling evidence that some strategies for parent and community involvement in the educational process substantially improve the quality of students' educational experiences and their achievement in schools. In 1987, Anne Henderson (1987) summarized a review of 49 research studies of the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement by concluding, "The evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement" (p. 131). Lareau (1989) has conducted studies that suggest that parental involvement in education is associated with high levels of morale and achievement in schools. If greater parental involvement can lead us toward high morale and high achievement, then greater parental involvement should be a goal for all of us. To attain that goal, it may be necessary to rise above the blame game so prevalent when discussion of school reform begins. Meier (2000) wrote of her experiences at Mission Hill school in Boston, where the school is intentionally kept small

so that adults can meet regularly, take responsibility for each other's work, and confer and argue over how best to get things right. Parents join the staff not only for formal governance meetings, but for monthly informal suppers, conversations, good times. (p. 20)

Perhaps the example of Mission Hill sets a standard for parental involvement that most urban schools cannot realistically attain; nevertheless, the lessons learned from the successes of Mission Hill might be transferred, at least in

part, to increasingly larger and increasingly unwieldy public and urban schools.

ESTABLISHING THE BOUNDARIES

As teaching has become more professionalized, educators have been reluctant to accept parental and public participation in education governance on an equal basis and instead have encouraged parental involvement on limited terms that they define (such as parental assistance with homework, participation in the PTA, and classroom volunteering). Educators typically have come to view themselves as caring professionals rather than as public servants answerable to the public and its elected representatives (McDonnell, 2000). Such views can probably be explained by a certain bunker mentality that comes with seemingly constant attacks from politicians and the public at large on such issues as teachers' competency and character. That teachers might feel collectively put upon and disrespected can hardly be a surprise, and a consequent wariness of parental involvement is nothing if not understandable as a result. Still, the profound differences that exist between what professional educators believe is best for children and what many parents and politicians believe is best leads to tremendous tension between these groups and often begets a serious lack of cooperation that is detrimental to students, in both the long term and the short term. Perhaps the most recent manifestation of the tension between professional and political values can be seen in the debate about outcomes within the schools. The differences between what professional educators argue that students should be taught and the content and pedagogy that parents and the public think are appropriate are significant.

The question that is currently driving most of the school reform conversation is the outcomes question, described by Cochran-Smith (2000) as "differing sets of assumptions about what teacher and teacher candidates should know and be able to do, what K-12 students should know and be able to do, and what the ultimate purposes of schooling should be" (p. 333). More easily identifiable outcomes in the form of more dependence on standardized testing is now the focal point of many school reform initiatives including those supported by President George W. Bush. The limitations of such testing are well documented (the September/October 2000 issue of the *Journal of Teacher Education* is entirely devoted to a discussion of high stakes testing,

and many of the limitations are addressed by notable authors including Alfie Kohn; Smith & Fey, 2000, also address the issue). Typically, much of the criticism leveled against standardized testing comes in the belief that students will spend little time learning and much time preparing for a test. Teachers, likewise, will spend much time teaching to the test, rather than instilling a desire on the part of the students to engage in lasting and lifelong learning practices. Despite the limitations, the popularity of increased standards rhetoric will presumably drive school reform discussion for months and perhaps years to come. There has been a great gnashing of teeth about declining standards and equally great consternation, often from business and other monied interests, about what to do with such declining performance, both real and perceived. Most of the debate about what to do places the responsibility for school and student improvement squarely on the shoulders of teachers. Although it is difficult to argue with the importance and influence of good teaching, less examined is the importance and influence of good parenting.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

The good old days in which parents cared about their children's education and played a vital role in it may never have actually differed significantly from today; but those days, real or not, have effectively been re-created in our collective memory. Today, we commonly lament the lack of parental involvement in their children's lives and in their children's schooling, to the extent that lack of parental involvement in schools and the negative impact that such lack of involvement implies has become part of the conventional wisdom. Whether or not lack of parental involvement with children's education is largely or even partially responsible for a list of societal ills, it is a concept that lies at the forefront of a new wave of education and educational reform literature. Blame for school failures, both real and perceived, has been placed on teachers and school systems for decades now. Books with such less than subtle titles as *Bad Teachers: The Essential Guide for Concerned Parents* (Strickland, 1998) have contributed to the impression that much, if not most of the blame for lack of student success lies squarely on the shoulders of teachers. A book about parental influence titled *Bad Parents: The Essential Guide for Concerned Teachers* (yet to be written, as far as I know), might raise too many eyebrows and most surely could not be written by a practicing teacher, however much truth may follow from such a title.

BEYOND BLAME

Moving beyond blame is easier said than done. Although numerous reforms receive varying degrees of attention, most fall by the wayside almost as quickly as they might pique our initial interest. Educational reform initiatives have long lamented declining standards, and much of the blame has rested squarely on teachers' and administrators' shoulders. Parental report cards may go some distance toward awakening parents and wider society to the disturbing realization that there has been, and remains, plenty of blame to go around.

Schools across the nation are being blamed for violence in our society, for unemployment, and for a decline in morals. The public hears almost daily from politicians, and from national organizations that influence politicians' agendas, about how rotten the public schools are. Meanwhile municipalities exempt local corporations from tax responsibilities, which reduces local funds for schools. Legislators mandate educational policy with little understanding of the likely consequences. So-called family groups advocate school curricula that alienate and disenfranchise students whose heritage and perspectives differ from the majority. (Brinkley, 1998, p. 57)

Will parental accountability catch on? Long-lasting transformations in education are shaped by social movements that push political, economic, and cultural institutions in specific directions and less by the work of educators and researchers (Apple, 2000). One thing is certain: There is a social movement afoot that seeks greater accountability on a wide scale. Smith, Stevenson, and Li (1998) advocated voluntary testing of both teachers and parents in an attempt to hold parents accountable for ensuring high student achievement in the areas of math and reading. Still, holding others accountable—teachers in the case of parents and legislators—seems entirely more politically popular and politically feasible at this moment than does self-accountability. While many, particularly on the political Right, advocate increased personal responsibility, they are less quick to advocate parental testing or to mandate parental involvement. Again, it would seem that personal responsibility largely means that "you" should take more responsibility for yourself and that teachers should take more responsibility for children, not that we parents ourselves should take on more personal responsibility.

Before the reader's eyes gloss over at the prospect of yet another school reform initiative, parental report cards represent a new and potentially fourth-wave movement toward reform that is different and arguably more

compelling than the first three waves. To summarize, first wave reforms typically grew out of concerns about economic competitiveness and were launched by the national reports of the early 1980s, particularly *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These reforms focused on higher standards for both teachers and students as well as greater standardization of the curriculum. For a compelling critique of the first wave, see, among others, Kohn (1998b). The second wave was largely a reaction to the first wave. This wave focused on decentralized decision making and teacher professionalism. Examples of second-wave reform initiatives are such things as parental choice, school-based management, and teaming. The third wave was deemed to be systemic reforms, which seemingly at least aimed for comprehensive, simultaneous change in many aspects of the educational system (Jacobson & Berne, 1993).

All such talk of reform and the many waves of reform that have swept over the country tend to indicate vast dissatisfaction with our schooling in America. After all, if all were well, the many reforms would not be the topic of endless conversation and literature in both mainstream and academic outlets.

Much has been made of President George W. Bush's interesting syntax. Recently, he announced plans to test each child from Grades 3 through 8 in reading and math. He did so with the following statement: "You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test." Whether or not our president could effectively pass such a test is not in question, as most Americans favor the concept that others, usually all others, be held to tougher standards whether those being subjected to such standards are schoolteachers, politicians, athletes, or even prisoners and prison guards. It is always easy to hold others to high standards. I expect my butcher, my baker, my dry cleaner, my accountant, my lawyer, and certainly my auto mechanic to do their very best work all the time. I expect them to be accountable for their mistakes and even to apologize to me when their service is lacking. Such accountability begs the issue of accountability hypocrisy, whether in regard to a president who has risen to power and influence through very little heavy lifting while urging others to work harder or through my own belief in others' always doing their best work while acknowledging that on some (hopefully not most) days as a college professor, I simply do not have it. Nevertheless, hypocritical or not, we Americans tend to expect more from our public educational system than we perceive that we have been getting. Teachers are to work harder, smarter, and faster regardless of their increasing class sizes, declining facilities and supplies, and increased pressures from parents and school boards.

What's not to like about accountability? It is as American as apple pie and motherhood. Teachers and schools being held accountable for our children—perhaps next we will ask that professors and colleges be held accountable for our young adults. As with most things potentially too good to be true (like large tax cuts and simultaneous increased spending), teacher and school accountability is not without its critics. But talk is cheap. Action carries more weight. In this instance, some teachers and some schools are taking that action by imposing on parents what parents want imposed on teachers and schools: accountability, even if it is only symbolic accountability with no real bite (it is not as if schools intend to take away children from parents who receive poor grades).

This accountability is taking shape in the form of parent report cards. Lest we parents become too overly concerned about failing grades, most of these report cards are going to be graded with a very forgiving curve. Indeed, rather than imposing letter grades, most report cards will be little more than parental checklists for parents to assess their own performances in such mundane, but critical parental tasks as reading aloud to one's children, making certain they have gotten to bed on time and have left for school having eaten a good breakfast, asking how a child's day has gone after school, and signing off on a child's homework.

**INSTEAD OF YOUR TIRED, HUNGRY, AND POOR,
COULD YOU START GIVING US YOUR WELL RESTED,
WELL FED, AND WELL RESOURCED?**

Most teachers believe that their jobs would be much easier if parents could be more committed partners in their children's education. Many teachers yearn for parents of kids who get in trouble to ask questions of their children first and not proclaim that their child's rights have been trampled first and ask questions only much later. Many teachers lament the abundance of televisions, stereos, and computers in their students' bedrooms and students' dedication to the serious use of each, without a correlating dedication on the part of parents and students alike to the virtues of reading and getting a proper amount of sleep. In urban schools where struggles with underfunding and declining enrollments only exacerbate any existing problems, the need for parents to do their job is paramount. Urban schools tend to have a disproportionate share of low-income and learning-disabled students, students who need meaningful partnerships between teachers and parents to improve their chances of success. Connecting schools and teachers with parents and their

children has become ever more important in today's increasingly disconnected environment.

We have long concerned ourselves within educational communities about the disconnection of life outside the school and the difficulty of establishing stable relationships with families (Sergiovanni, 1992, 1994). Among other things, concerns about life for students outside of the schools has led to attempts to supply needed support by changing the nature of the school into a genuine community. Community building is an overt attempt to decrease alienation among and between students and teachers and, perhaps as important, between teachers and parents. Accountability is intimately connected to trust. Teachers must face the fact, and surely they do, that accountability measures are an indication that parents, school boards, and political leaders simply do not entirely trust them to do good work on their own. Similar issues of distrust have led legislatures to pass mandatory sentencing laws that restrict judges from using too much discretion and make them more accountable to the public. Trust, however, as everyone already knows, is a two-way street. If parents and school boards, as well as the president, despite his rhetoric concerning his own marriage, do not trust teachers, it should not be entirely surprising that many teachers do not implicitly trust those same parents, school boards, and political leaders. To hold one group accountable without seeking reciprocal accountability may be unfair. If we want to more carefully grade teachers for the results they get from students, we might consider grading parents for the tasks they perform or fail to perform, which influence their own children's success or lack of success in school. The rhetoric of parental grading places a burden on families in terms of improving student achievement and/or the schools themselves. Is such a burden fair? Does such a burden ignore the tremendous and growing disparity between the social advantages of a few and the significant limits of many, particularly in our urban schools? Working-class, cultural minority, and single-parent families may be severely limited in their opportunities to provide effective social participation in the schools (de Carvalho, 2001). Such acknowledgment does not negate the value of parental involvement, nor does it refute the rhetorical power of parental report cards. It may, however, call for educators to continue their quest for a fuller understanding of diversity issues and the various difficulties faced by many families.

Those who live in the leafy, White suburbs, as affluent bedroom communities have often come to be known, have their own anecdotes about usually well-intentioned parents interfering with school and teacher decisions. Some parents, for example, request that their second grader be privileged enough to

have a certain teacher, while others go beyond requesting and ultimately demand such preferential treatment for their children. Whether those demands are in the form of continual pleas to a principal or, in the case of some well-connected parents, pleas to school board members and other influential members of the community, it is clear that parental involvement is not always apple pie and motherhood. Despite what might be the best efforts of administrators and teachers to balance classrooms and create as positive a learning environment as can be done, some parents insist that they know best—essentially, that teachers and administrators cannot be entirely trusted to do what it is they do. Certainly, in that context, those same parents should not feel personally affronted when teachers and administrators ask them to grade their own efforts. If indeed only parents know what is best for their individual children, why do not teachers and administrators know what is best for their own individual classrooms?

Regardless of whether giving grades to parents would add to the testing overload that many critics say is already derailing real education, genuine accountability would seem to mandate that we parents ask ourselves first, before we ask our schools, whether we are making acceptable grades. Finally, although we should expect quality efforts from our children and from their schools, we should first and foremost expect it, and demand it, of ourselves.

Shining the light on certain things has not always improved our collective vision of those things. For example, when cameras were allowed in courtrooms, we found that not all attorneys, in fact not many attorneys, were as articulate and engaging as was Perry Mason. The recent case of *Gore v. Bush* showed the Supreme Court to be less a champion of the constitution and more a political arm of government. In essence, the more we know and the more we see, the less we tend to be impressed by any former myths we may have held. The myths that surround what teachers do and how much effort they put into the teaching of our children, in contrast, may improve with more knowledge of what actually goes on in our schools. It seems that everyone has an opinion on education, even those without much information. In fact, some of the strongest opinions are held by those who have not set foot in an elementary or secondary school since they left one as a student. The involvement of parents in their children's education, and greater involvement of parents with teachers, may have the profound impact of softening some of the harsh rhetoric concerning the public schools and contributing to a greater understanding of the hard work that most teachers engage in against increasingly difficult odds of success.

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