

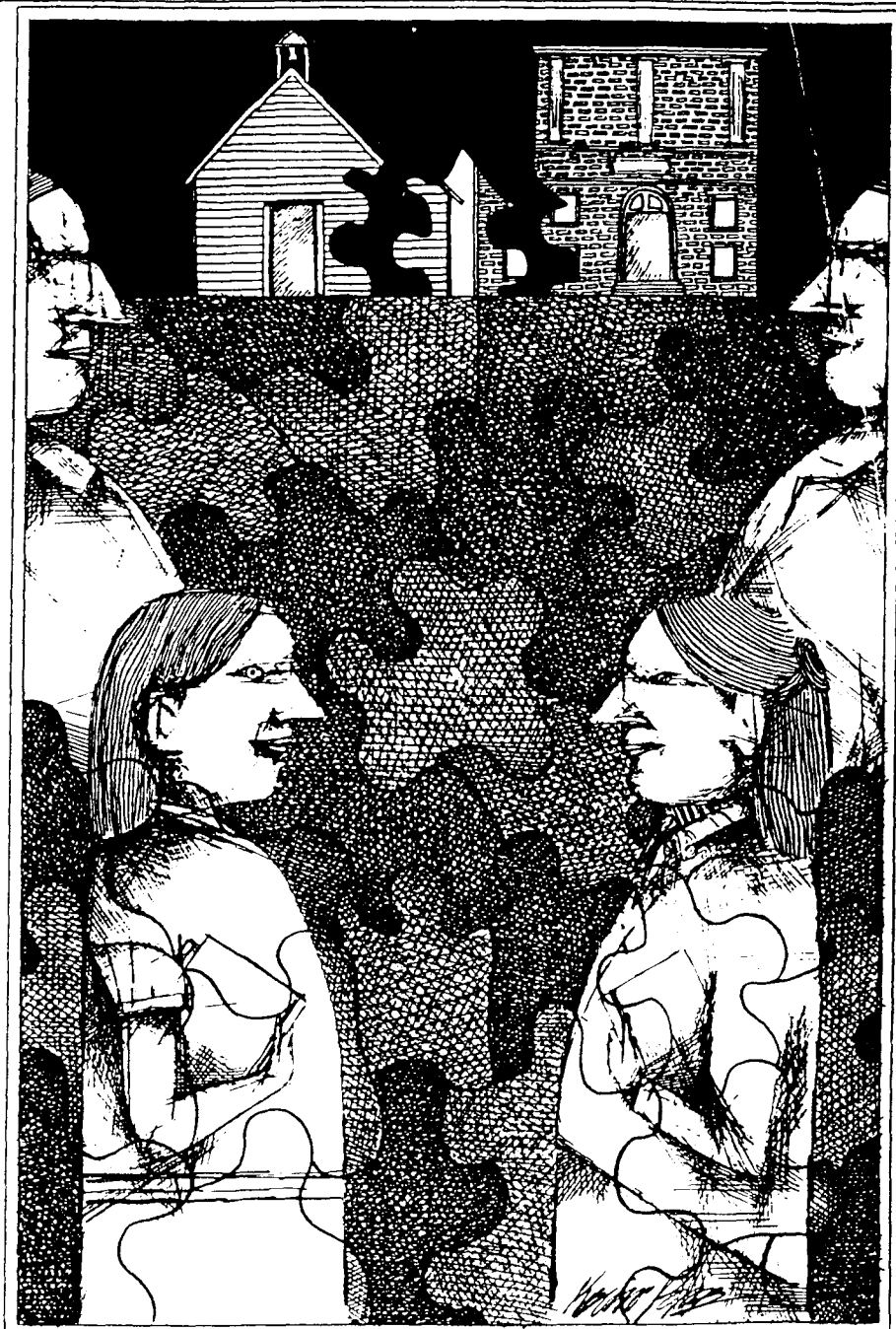
# Schools and the Communities They Serve

by James S. Coleman

What do Tucker County, West Virginia, and Hyde Park in Chicago have in common? In telling us, Mr. Coleman also suggests ways to revitalize our schools, our neighborhoods, and our society.

**S**OME VARIATIONS among schools affect their operations, yet seldom play a part in school policies. I will examine one such crucial variation in this article. First, however, let me describe schools in two communities with which I am familiar, to give

*JAMES S. COLEMAN is a professor of sociology and education at the University of Chicago. An earlier version of this article was presented in September 1984 at a conference in celebration of the 140th anniversary of the founding of the School of Education that is now part of the State University of New York at Albany. The revision was aided by discussion at that conference and by comments from Robert Merton and Mary Alice Klein.*



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a sense of the kind of comparisons I plan to make.

The first community is in the heart of Appalachia. It lies in Tucker County, West Virginia, a rural and mountainous region largely covered by forest. The county has only one town of any size: Parsons, the county seat, population 1,937. Tucker County has one high school, one vocational high school, and several elementary schools.

I am most familiar with the community served by one of the elementary schools, a school with three teachers and five grades. The first and second grades are together under one teacher, grades 3 through 5 are together under another, and there is one head teacher — though the grade combinations vary each year, depending on the size of the age groups. The teachers live in the local community. Parents know them well, both directly and through the extended network of kinship, friendship, and work relationships that pervades each of the communities served by the school and connects these communities.

The fathers of some of the children work in the mines; some have farms (not productive enough to make a living), which they combine with other jobs, such as driving a school bus; some are engaged in such community services as operating a gas station and general store or delivering mail. In Parsons, the county seat, the jobs are more diversified — insurance agent, barber, bank teller, state or county employee. Some of the men receive unemployment compensation, and a few families are on welfare; until the mines reopened a few years ago, many more were. One man, who had children late in life by an Indian woman he brought back from Mexico, draws disability compensation for injuries suffered in the mines. A number of the older men in the community receive black lung compensation.

Because many of the fathers work near home and because the men often work around the house, yard, and garden, they see their children a lot when the children are not in school. They sometimes play

with the younger children, but the form of interaction changes when the children reach age 8 or 10. The fathers' activities are physical and often outdoors, and the boys (and some of the girls) tag along. The boys often emulate their fathers, whether riding four-wheelers or motorcycles, drinking beer, trying to chew tobacco, or hunting raccoons.

Most of the mothers do not work outside the home, but some do, in the local shoe factory or in clerical jobs in the county seat. Many of the grandparents of schoolchildren live in the community, as do many of their aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives. Few parents have gone beyond high school, and many never completed high school. Most of the children will not go beyond high school, but some will — and most of those who do so will leave the county because of the absence of work other than the sorts of jobs described above. Thus depleted, the next generation that remains in Tucker County will continue to consist primarily of high school graduates and dropouts.

The weekly newspaper published in the county seat usually contains extended news about children in school: competitions for queen of the county fair and for homecoming queen and for the queen's court (which includes grade school children), or football games, or car accidents involving local teenagers, or accounts of local boys' scrapes with the law.

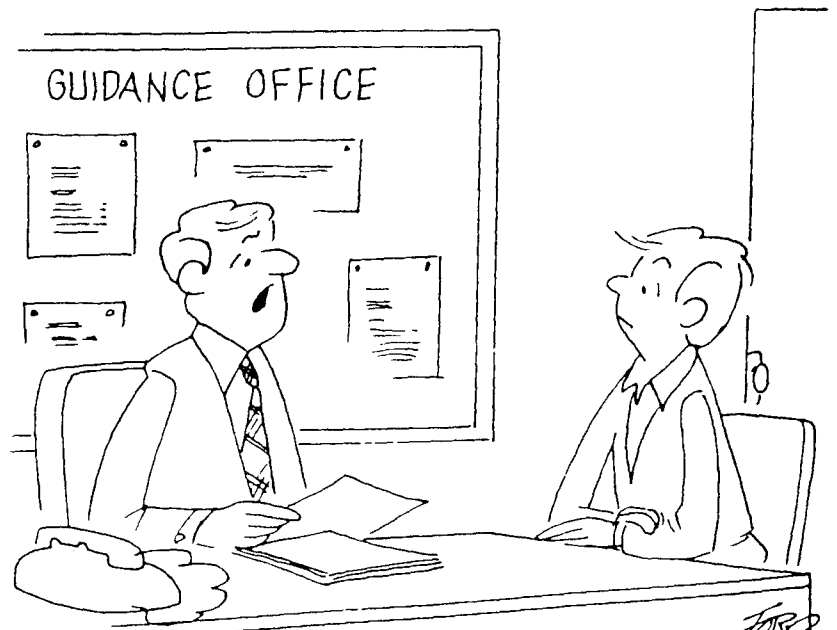
These communities in Tucker County, and the schools that serve them, are the residue of a segment of rural America that

now represents only a tiny fraction of the country.

**T**HE SECOND community is also unusual, though in many respects it could hardly be more different from the one I've just described. This community is Hyde Park-Kenwood, which surrounds the University of Chicago. Nearly three-fourths of the faculty members of the university live in Hyde Park or Kenwood, within a mile of the university. Many walk or ride bicycles to work; those who come by car drive only a few blocks.

The Hyde Park community has several public elementary schools, three private schools (two of them affiliated with religious groups), and one university laboratory school. There is a single large public high school and a private high school, the laboratory school. I am most familiar with the laboratory elementary school and will focus on it.

This school, with three or four classes per grade level, is larger than the one in Tucker County. Many of the teachers live in Hyde Park or Kenwood, and some are affiliated with the university community. Some parents know their children's teachers outside school, but most do not. They do know them by reputation, through the extended network of friendship, neighborhood, and work relations that binds Hyde Park and Kenwood. Kinship networks are largely missing, though there are examples of family "dynasties" with



"You want to make lots of money, and you're asking advice from someone who makes \$14,500 a year?"

Figure 1

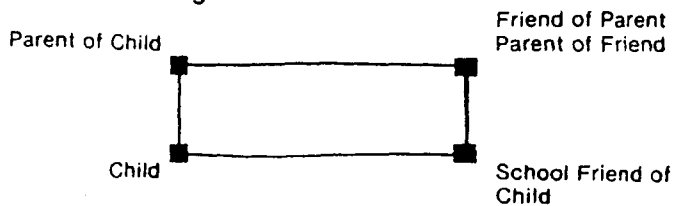
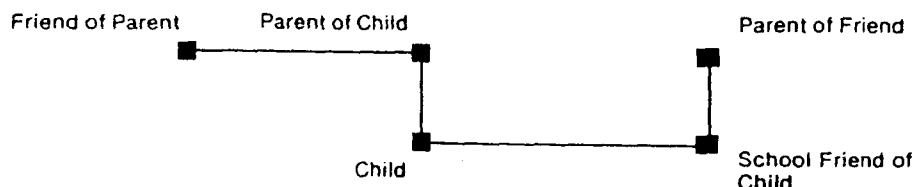


Figure 2



members involved in University of Chicago schools through virtually their whole lives. The most prominent are Edward and Julian Levi, brothers who were first enrolled in the laboratory nursery school and who have recently retired as president of the university and professor of law at the university.

One or both parents of most children in the lab school work at the university, either as faculty or staff members. Younger children are often brought to school on foot by fathers or mothers on their way to work at the university. Others live in Hyde Park (or adjacent Kenwood) and are connected to the university community only by friendship relations and neighborhood associations. A few live outside the Hyde Park-Kenwood area and are not connected to these networks at all.

More of the lab school mothers than the Tucker County mothers are employed outside the home, many at the university. The lack of an extensive network of kinship relations means that there are few family gatherings at which gossip flows about children, teachers, and school; but there are many social gatherings at which such gossip flows.

Nearly all the students at the lab school will go on to college, and many will obtain advanced degrees. A few of those will remain in the community, but most will leave. In contrast to the residents in the Tucker County communities, their families will be succeeded by others from outside the community, similar in education and lifestyle but geographically mobile.

**A**N INCIDENT in each of these two schools will facilitate further comparisons.

*Event 1.* On the first day of school in Tucker County, a fourth-grader reported to her mother that her sister (a first-grader who is shy and verbally backward) cried most of the time, and that the

head teacher, Mrs. X, yelled at her, which made her cry even more. The mother called the first-grade teacher and asked her about it, then called two friends and talked to them about Mrs. X.

The next day, the fourth-grader reported that much the same thing had happened. Again, the mother talked to friends about the events. On the third day the mother went to the school, confronted Mrs. X, and discussed her first-grade daughter. By the weekend, the daughter seemed to have accepted school; she had stopped crying, and Mrs. X had stopped yelling. Nevertheless, at a barbecue on Saturday of that week, most of the gossip among the mother and three other women (two whose children had attended the school and one whose child would enter school the next year) was about the school and the teacher — with occasional remarks from one of the men, who knew and didn't like Mrs. X's husband.

*Event 2.* Last spring, a faculty member at the University of Chicago realized that his son, who was then in nursery school, was due to be placed in one of the lab school kindergarten classes. He talked to a colleague in his department, who said vehemently, "Don't let him be put in Mrs. A's class. She is terrible for boys who don't do just what she expects." The colleague's son had had that same teacher and had adjusted to school only after being moved to another class. When the father spoke to a second colleague whose two sons had attended the school, he heard a similar story about Mrs. A.

Then the mother talked to some friends and heard a slightly different story about Mrs. A: that she was strict, demanding, and not good for children (especially boys) whose progress was slow. The parents then talked at length to Mrs. B, their son's nursery-school teacher, who had followed the progress of many of her former students in Mrs. A's classes. They also talked to other nursery-school par-

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ents whose children were friends of their son. Based on Mrs. B's comments, the set of parents decided collectively to have their children placed in Mrs. A's class. The friends all began kindergarten in Mrs. A's class — but their parents remained especially attentive because of the warnings they had heard.

I could list additional events, but these two are sufficient to introduce the explicit comparisons I wish to make. I am suggesting that — despite the enormous differences between these two communities, between the probable futures of the children who live in them, and between the schools that serve them — there are strong similarities. I also wish to suggest that most public schools in the United States differ sharply from these two schools and are becoming more different all the time.

**W**HAT MAKES these two schools similar and distinguishes them from most U.S. schools is the strength of the functional communities they serve. The Tucker County school serves a functional community built around kinship, residence, church, and work. The Hyde Park school serves a functional community built primarily around work and residence.

Perhaps the most important property of these functional communities (for my purposes here) can, without too much distortion, be expressed in a single sentence: *A child's friends and associates in school are sons and daughters of friends and associates of the child's parents.* This property is expressed in Figure 1. In contrast, a diagram representing the absence of a functional community that spans generations (Figure 2) does not show this kind of closure.

The two events I described, involving the Tucker County first-grader and the Hyde Park kindergartner, make it evident that something very like the type of closure shown in Figure 1 was critical to the actions taken by the parents. Without the

closure, in a social structure like that shown in Figure 2, the Tucker County mother would not have had the information that reinforced her views and encouraged her to go to the school and talk to the head teacher. She would have been forced to rely on her individual resources, and for most parents these are not sufficiently strong to impel actions of the sort she took. The intimidation of the school is far too strong.

The diagram is not precisely accurate in the Tucker County case, since some of the friends on whom the mother depended were not parents of friends of her daughter, but parents whose children had been in the same social context — in the same school with the same teacher. The same holds true in the second example: the two colleagues with whom the Hyde Park father discussed the kindergarten teachers were not parents of his son's friends, but parents whose sons had been exposed to those teachers.

Nevertheless, with this minor caveat, the general principle stands. In these functional communities, the social structure characteristic of parents and children exhibits *intergenerational closure* of the sort shown in Figure 1. In school settings not embedded in functional communities, the social structure of the community fails to exhibit such closure, thus cutting off the information flow that strengthens and supports parents in their school-related activities. Information flow of the sort exhibited in these events is not the only — nor perhaps even the most important — type of feedback or support provided to the parent by a functional community

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with closure of the sort shown in Figure 1. In such a community, the parent need not depend only on the child for information about the child's behavior, both in and out of school. The parent has additional channels: through the friends and acquaintances of the child, then to the parents of those children, and back to the parent. The parent has an informal network of sentinels — each imperfect but, taken together, capable of providing a rich store of information about the child's behavior and even capable of exercising discipline in lieu of the parent. In the absence of this closure, the last link of the feedback chain is missing, and there are no sentinels on whom the parent can rely. The child's behavior can remain unnoticed and unattended by adults whom the parent knows, and the parent is again unsupported — in negotiations not with the school but with the child.

It may well be this consequence of the

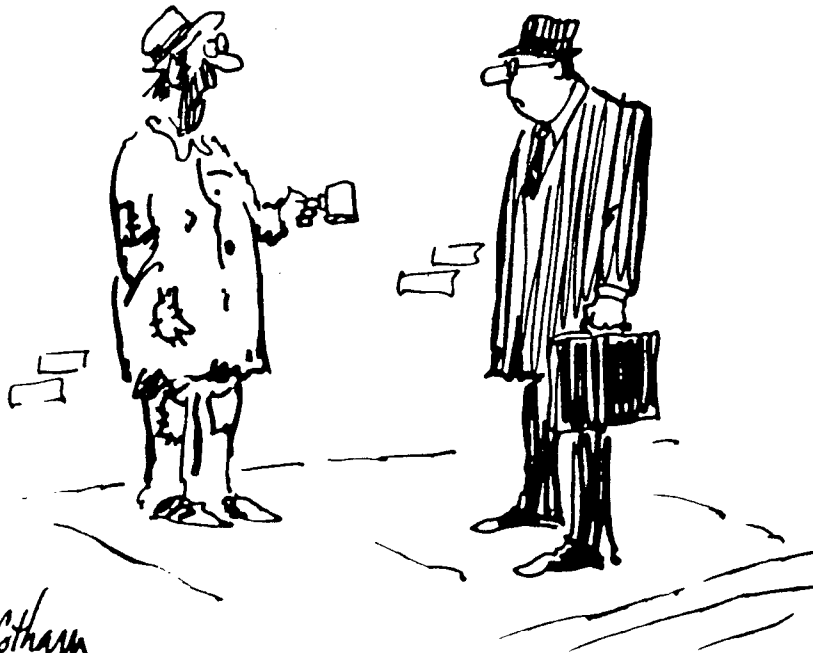
decline of intergenerational closure — the inability of a community of parents to establish and enforce norms of behavior for their children — that has made schools so difficult to govern in recent years. If so, the prognosis for school administration is not good, for the decline shows no sign of reversal.

Another consequence of closure within the functional community is the possibilities it creates for personal relations between a child and an adult other than the child's parents. In Tucker County, a grandfather may help his grandson raise a calf for 4-H, or a man whose own sons are grown may introduce his neighbor's son to the complexities of trapping. There is no shortage of youth leaders. In Hyde Park, there is less such interest, but there is some. A faculty member will hire a colleague's teenage daughter or son as a research assistant, or a runner whom a faculty member knows at the fieldhouse will teach his friend's son about training to become a competitive runner.

In a structure without closure (Figure 2), a child's principal relations with adults are — except for teachers — with his or her own parents. There is little reason for another adult to take an avuncular interest in the child's friends. Indeed, any such interest is suspect, given the potential for exploitation, sexual or otherwise.

Throughout American society, there has been for some years a decline in the number of volunteer youth leaders (e.g., scoutmasters or boys and girls club leaders); currently, there is increased alarm about sexual exploitation of children by adults. If my analysis is correct, both of these phenomena are a consequence of the decline of functional communities with intergenerational closure.

It is also important to point out some other consequences of functional communities characterized by a social structure with intergenerational closure — but consequences that are inimical to equality of opportunity. A social structure with closure facilitates the development of *reputations*; in a structure without closure, reputations are nonexistent. And in a social structure with intergenerational closure, there is the *inheritance* of reputation. An example from Tucker County illustrates this well. The man with the Mexican-Indian wife and the back injury from working in the mines, whom I'll call Jack, had a reputation as a ne'er-do-well. He lived with his wife and two children in a two-room shack surrounded by broken-down cars. His children went to school, of course, though they very likely did not receive much support and encouragement at home. And because everyone knew the father, that is, because of the intergenerational closure of the community, the father's reputation descended to his son.



"No need to say anything, Dean Wilson. I can tell you're disappointed in me!"

The son left school early, got a girl pregnant, and has moved with her into a trailer. He's something of a hell-raiser and appears likely to turn out like his father. It is difficult to know to what extent the son's career in school and since is due to his home environment and to what extent his inherited reputation itself had an impact within the school. But suppose for a moment that Jack and his wife, while otherwise no different, had provided an exemplary environment for doing homework and fulfilling school requirements. The reputation would still have been inherited by the son, and it would still have been a difficult impediment to overcome.

This kind of inheritance of reputation exists to a lesser extent in Hyde Park, both because the community has less intergenerational closure and because of egalitarian values held by many Hyde Park residents. Yet the feedback channels do exist, and there is some inheritance of reputation — more than in a suburb characterized by anomie. As a result, some children go through school with a subtle advantage. A child of a distinguished professor inherits a portion of the parent's reputation, a legacy that the child of an ordinary member of the community lacks.

This impediment to equal opportunity is not a new one; indeed, it has been documented in studies such as *Middletown*, by Robert and Helen Lynd (1929) and *Elm-town's Youth*, by A.B. Hollingshead (1949). What has *not* been generally noted is that the inheritance of reputation depends on a social structure with intergenerational closure, that such structures also bring benefits, and that such structures are vanishing from U.S. society. (Richard Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy* [1957], an examination of working-class neighborhoods in the urban North of England, is one of the few who has documented the benefits of this closure.)

Indeed, some of the benefits of these social structures are particularly important for disadvantaged children. One of the major changes that rural migrants to city ghettos or slums experience is the loss of the functional community that has aided in disciplining their children and keeping them out of trouble. Such a loss is especially severe for families with meager economic and personal resources. Jack's son, for instance, may have been branded by his father's reputation, but he has also been kept out of some trouble by community sanctions that would be missing in modern urban or suburban areas.

More generally, we might conjecture that the strong collective resources provided by communities with intergenerational closure (whether in ethnic urban neighborhoods or in rural areas) were important for the extraordinary social and intellectual development that occurred in

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the first half of the 20th century among Americans whose parents had few personal resources. Today, a variety of changes have broken that closure. Consequently, the two schools I've described (one public and one private) and the functional communities surrounding them are atypical.

To be sure, some communities have many of the characteristics I have attributed to functional communities, but many forces act to weaken them. Most fathers work outside the communities in which their children attend school, and an increasing number of mothers do also. Friends and associates are increasingly drawn from the workplace rather than from the neighborhood. Work- and residence-based ties have been eroded, as the men who were once their foundation have gone to work outside the community. Neighborhood-based associations are weakened, as the women who were once their foundation enter the labor force. Geographic mobility reduces the proximity of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins in the lives of children.

School policies at all levels — federal, state, and local — have also weakened the community in which the school is embedded. These policies have included school consolidation (designed to introduce "efficiencies of scale") and those kinds of school desegregation that have been explicitly designed to break the neighborhood/school connection. Policies of increasing school size and reducing school grade-spans have had similar effects.

The overall impact of all of these changes, some technological in origin and some political, has been to destroy the networks of relations that once existed in geographic neighborhoods and linked these neighborhoods to the schools within them.

### RESIDENTIAL PROXIMITY AND FUNCTIONAL COMMUNITIES

The functional communities that once existed in the U.S., communities within

which public schools were embedded, were defined geographically. They were *neighborhoods*, characterized by rich textures of interpersonal relations and by the kind of intergenerational closure that is still found in Tucker County and, to a lesser extent, in Hyde Park. But, though functional communities built on a residential base have largely vanished, the public schools continue to be organized on a residential base.

Some private schools in the U.S. are created by functional communities that are not residentially based. Most of these schools are religious, but some, like the University of Chicago Laboratory School, have a different institutional base.

A smaller number of private schools, largely concentrated in the Northeast, have traditionally been based on functional communities defined by a geographically dispersed but socially connected social elite. Many of these schools no longer have this closure; instead, they are attended by children whose parents are not only geographically dispersed but also have no functional connection. Thus it may be that, though some private schools exhibit higher levels of intergenerational closure than can be found in public schools, others exhibit the very lowest levels of closure.

However, much opposition to private schooling has been based on the exclusionary and separatist consequences of intergenerational closure not based on residential communities. The ideology of the common public school has been based on the premise that a school serving a residentially defined community provides a much more democratic and socially integrating form of intergenerational closure — bringing together children of different religions, different social classes, different ethnic groups, and thereby bringing their families closer together — than does a school serving a community based on ethnic, religious, or social-elitist connections.

In general, this premise has been a sound one. In recent years, however, the residential community has ceased to be a functional community except in such unusual instances as Tucker County or Hyde Park. Furthermore, the separation of work and residence has destroyed the democratic and integrating character of schools based on residential proximity. Residential areas are quite homogeneous both in income and in race.

THE RECENCY and gradualness of the demise of residential communities as functional communities have generally obscured the fact that functional communities are an important social resource, not least be-

cause of the possibility they create for intergenerational closure, connecting communities of adults to communities of children. Thus social policy persists in opposing schools serving communities based on anything but residence, on much the same grounds as in the past. There is little recognition of the important fact that breaking down the intergenerational closure of non-residence-based communities does not lead to more democratic and integrated functional communities, but to racially and economically homogeneous schools without the strength that can be provided by an adult functional community.

The issue of the organization of education, then, has come to be a different one than in the past. The issue now is whether the benefits of intergenerational closure provided by schools serving non-geographically-defined communities outweigh the separatist tendencies inherent in such communities. Or, to put it differently, the issue is whether the value of this social resource — the intergenerational closure provided by schools serving functional communities — is sufficiently great to outweigh the costs of such schools to broader social assimilation.

#### A NEW RANGE OF POLICIES

The general decline of functional communities in American society and the loss of intergenerational closure that has attended this decline make the question of how best to organize education much more difficult to resolve than when functional communities were abundant. Once the issue is seen in the context in which I have presented it here, then a broader range of policies in the organization of education becomes evident. It may be possible to organize schools so that the social

costs brought about by technological change are mitigated without reimposing all the costs that resulted from our old social structures.

Some institutions designed to strengthen intergenerational closure have long existed. Parent/Teacher Associations certainly have this aim. In some cases, they are able to reinstitute links between parents that afford a degree of intergenerational closure. In many cases, however, parents have too few daily, informal contacts to sustain these links. Some principals and teachers have attempted to bring together parents for ad hoc meetings when an issue or crisis arises in the school (e.g., drug abuse or suicide). Crises of this sort can sometimes establish ties between parents that persist, even in the absence of regular contact. Thus school crises, if they mobilize parents in any collective fashion, can leave as residue a set of relations that aid the school, the parents, and their children in the future.

The fact that intense common experiences create enduring ties suggests other possible policies. Some private schools (and, less often, public schools) use events sponsored by parents as a means of raising money; this type of event can strengthen parental links. Recognizing this, school administrators can initiate events and activities designed specifically to bring together parents of children in the school. Many administrators know that, by creating collective strength among parents, they create a force that can be a nuisance; less often do they recognize that this collective strength can be a resource that both eases their task of governing a school and benefits the children who attend it.

There are more fundamental changes that can help achieve intergenerational closure. The most direct approach would be to reopen the question of organizing

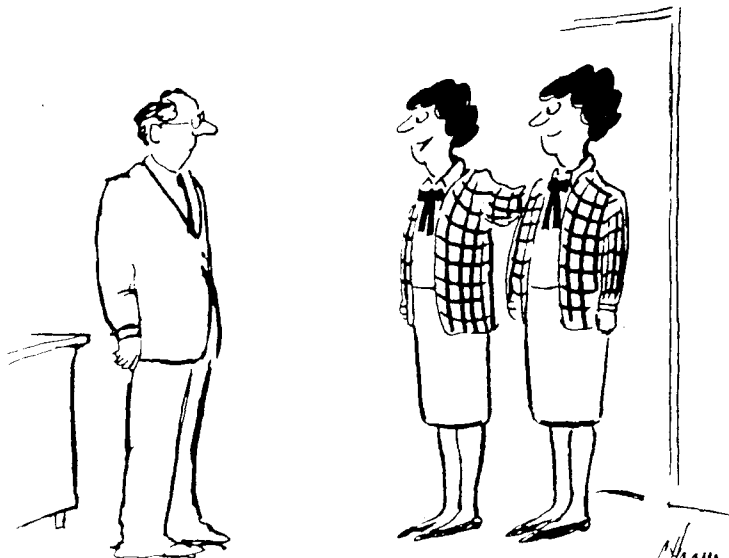
publicly supported schools by residential proximity. As I have indicated above, the assumptions on which that model of school organization is based no longer hold, except in isolated instances outside metropolitan areas. Yet the pattern of school organization continues to exist.

When that question is reopened, one way of answering it would be to search for those functional communities that still remain in the highly individualistic society that the United States has become. Religious association continues to be a basis for functional communities for some, for whom religious observance, religious affiliation, and activities related to religion are important enough to play a part in everyday life. For some of these persons, private schools run by their religious groups create intergenerational closure. This suggests a reexamination of the uniquely American policy of refusing public support for privately organized schools.

Another basis for functional communities for much broader sets of adults is the workplace of either or both parents. Increasingly, adults' friends are drawn from the workplace rather than from the neighborhood. It follows that a natural way to reestablish intergenerational closure is to organize schools by workplaces. (The University of Chicago Laboratory School is an illustration; however, that school exists only because the university performs research and teaching related to education.) Schools based at the workplaces of parents, whether in a steel mill or in an office building downtown, constitute a sharp departure from neighborhood-based schools. But this model has the potential to partially reconstitute the intergenerational community that no longer exists in the neighborhood and, furthermore, to cut across racial and economic lines.

The changes in school policy that I have suggested indicate some of the ways in which school reorganization might help to reunite the communities of children and youth with the adult community. These are not the only possible policy changes. Yet they serve to open these questions for discussion, so that we may examine potential ways of reconstituting intergenerational closure without reintroducing the social costs that have traditionally accompanied it.

Schools have long been based on the premise of strong families and strong functional communities of families. Now that the functional communities of neighborhood have withered and families themselves are increasingly fragile, it may be that the goals of schools can best be aided by policies that build upon and strengthen those links that exist among families. □



"I'd like you to meet my substitute teacher."