

SCHOOL SLEUTH:
THE CASE OF THE EXCELLENT SCHOOL

A production of
The Merrow Report
©2000 Learning Matters, Inc.

SCENE 1 [OUTSIDE]

MERROW: I HAD A DATE TO KEEP AT MY OFFICE, IN A PART OF TOWN THAT'S SEEN BETTER DAYS. GUESS I'VE SEEN BETTER DAYS TOO, SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE INVESTIGATING SCHOOLS, LOOKING FOR THE BEST, EXPOSING THE WORST. THIS IS MY STORY.

CREDITS

CHAPTER 1: SAFETY

SCENE 2 [IN OFFICE]

MERROW: I WAS DOWN ON MY LUCK, HADN'T SEEN A CASE IN MONTHS, BUT THAT'S THE WAY THE BUSINESS ALWAYS IS— SOUR, JUST BEFORE IT TURNS SWEET.

WOMAN: MR. MERROW I PRESUME, SCHOOL SLEUTH?

MERROW: YES, COME ON IN. HAVE A SEAT.

WOMAN'S VOICE: I HAVE A WORRISOME CASE, MR. MERROW. IT REQUIRES A DETECTIVE WITH A CERTAIN FINESSE.

MERROW: YOU STOPPED AT THE RIGHT DOOR, SWEETHEART. LAY IT ON ME.

WOMAN: IT'S THE SCHOOLS. I'M TRYING TO FIND THE RIGHT ONE FOR MY CHILDREN, BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW TO CHOOSE. EVERYBODY TALKS ABOUT TEST SCORES, BUT I KNOW THERE'S MORE TO EDUCATION THAN THAT. CAN YOU HELP ME?

MERROW: I'VE BEEN HEARING ABOUT CASES LIKE YOURS -- PARENTS WITH CHOICE, TRYING TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT SCHOOL. LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I'VE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS. TURNS OUT THERE'RE 3 KINDS OF SCHOOLS, BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT.

WOMAN: WHAT'S A "GOOD ENOUGH" SCHOOL?

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

MERROW: IT'S THE KIND MOST PEOPLE SETTLE FOR. THEY WANT TO BELIEVE THEY'RE OKAY, BUT DEEP DOWN THEY KNOW BETTER. TROUBLE IS, NOBODY'S WILLING TO MAKE CHANGE.

WOMAN: SO THEY SETTLE FOR LESS, PLAY IT SAFE?

MERROW: THAT'S RIGHT. AND SPEAKING OF SAFETY, EVERYBODY SAFETY, SO THAT'S WHERE I'LL START— IN HIGH SCHOOL.

WOMAN: I'M LISTENING.

MERROW: AND SHE WAS... I TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND PULLED HER INTO MY STORY.

[FADE INTO DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL]

MERROW AS NARRATOR (M/N): ARE PUBLIC SCHOOLS SAFE? THAT'S HARD TO BELIEVE WITH ALL THE SHOOTINGS WE'VE HAD. SCHOOL SHOOTINGS, LIKE THIS ONE IN ARKANSAS, ARE WHAT MOST PEOPLE THINK ABOUT WHEN THEY THINK ABOUT SAFETY.

M/N: GUN VIOLENCE IS ON EVERYONE'S MIND THESE DAYS. PHILADELPHIA SPENT FIVE MILLION DOLLARS PUTTING METAL DETECTORS IN EVERY PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL. CHICAGO DID THE SAME IN ITS MIDDLE SCHOOLS. OTHER SCHOOLS ARE DOING RANDOM SEARCHES, INSTALLING SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS, AND MORE.

M/N: THESE ARE NOT REAL GUNMEN. THEY'RE POLICE, PRETENDING TO BE. PART OF A PRACTICE DRILL AT ROYAL PALM BEACH HIGH SCHOOL IN FLORIDA. SWAT TEAMS FROM THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE STORMED THE BUILDING, AS STUDENTS PRETENDED TO BE THE VICTIMS.

M/N: IS ALL THIS HEIGHTENED SECURITY SOMEHOW AN OVERREACTION TO THE THREAT OF GUN VIOLENCE? TURNS OUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS ARE RARE. THERE WERE NINE GUN-RELATED HOMICIDES LAST YEAR -- ROUGHLY ONE DEATH FOR EVERY SIX MILLION STUDENTS. FIGHTS AND ASSAULTS, HOWEVER, ARE NOT RARE. LAST YEAR, POLICE RESPONDED TO ROUGHLY 200,000 INCIDENTS.

M/N: IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING THAT "GOOD ENOUGH" SCHOOLS ARE PHYSICALLY SAFE PLACES, BUT HOW CAN YOU TELL? TRY VISITING THE SCHOOL, AS I DID, BUT DON'T USE THE FRONT DOOR. USE THE BACK DOOR INSTEAD AND THE DOORS AT THE LOADING DOCKS TOO. IF YOU CAN GET IN NO QUESTIONS ASKED, THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

M/N: VISIT BATHROOMS TO LOOK FOR SIGNS OF TROUBLE, LIKE GRAFFITI THAT NAMES KIDS IN A MEAN OR THREATENING WAY OR THAT SMACKS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT.

M/N: HAVING LOTS OF ADULTS AROUND IS ONE GOOD WAY TO KEEP SCHOOLS SAFE, AND NOT JUST SECURITY GUARDS. IN GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS, THE TEACHERS MAINTAIN A PRESENCE. TALK TO STUDENTS TOO. ASK THEM ABOUT THE PLACES IN SCHOOL WHERE THEY FEEL UNSAFE AND CHECK THEM OUT FOR YOURSELF.

M/N: AFTER COLUMBINE, MANY SCHOOLS FEEL COMPELLED TO EMPHASIZE VIOLENCE PREVENTION. TAKEN TOO FAR, HOWEVER, IT'S HAVING UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES, EVEN IN "GOOD ENOUGH" SCHOOLS.

LISA DELPIT: PEOPLE CANNOT LEARN UNDER STRESS, AND I FIND CHILDREN ARE SO STRESSED RIGHT NOW. THINK ABOUT ALL THE THINGS THAT OUR KIDS ARE HAVING TO CONTEND WITH AND DEAL WITH, AND THEN WE ADD ADDITIONAL BURDENS ON THEM IN SCHOOL, AND THEN WE EXPECT THEM TO BE ABLE TO BE COMFORTABLE ENOUGH AND RELAXED ENOUGH TO LEARN. I THINK IT'S NOT GOING TO HAPPEN.

M/N: ANOTHER UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE OF ADDED SECURITY -- KIDS MAY BE BOTTLING UP NORMAL EMOTIONS. THAT'S A BAD SIGN.

LUYEN CHOU: WE HAVE TO BE CAREFUL THAT IN THE NAME OF SAFETY, WE AREN'T IN SOME WAY QUELLING AN OPENNESS TO EXPRESSION OF DIFFERENT EMOTIONS AND DIFFERENT FEELINGS.

LARS: THERE IS A LITTLE BIT OF A PRESSURE NOT TO ADMIT TO BEING ON EDGE OR BEING UNHAPPY BECAUSE THEN AUTOMATICALLY PEOPLE ARE GOING TO ASSUME, OR NOT ASSUME BUT JUST ASSOCIATE YOU WITH, OH THAT'S THAT KID WHO'S GOING TO FLY OFF THE HANDLE AT ANY MOMENT.

MERROW: I MEAN, SHOULD A KID BE ABLE TO SAY, "I WAS SO MAD THIS MORNING, I JUST WANTED TO PUNCH SOMEBODY."

LISA DELPIT: WELL, I SAY THAT AT MY WORKPLACE, SO I WOULD IMAGINE -- I WOULD SAY THAT A CHILD SHOULD BE ABLE TO SAY IT.

SCENE 3 [IN OFFICE]

WOMAN: YOU MENTIONED A THIRD CATEGORY, MR. MERROW -- EXCELLENT SCHOOLS. TELL ME ABOUT THOSE.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

MERROW: SURE, EXCELLENT SCHOOLS PROVIDE MORE THAN JUST PHYSICAL SAFETY. THINK ABOUT HOW KIDS TEASE OTHER KIDS.

[FADE INTO DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL]

MIGUEL: WELL, THEY JUST CALL ME BIG HEAD...

MALE STUDENT: SOMETIMES IF I'M LIKE READING OUT LOUD, OR SOMETHING, I CAN'T GET THE WORD OUT, I START STUTTERING, THEY, LIKE, CALL ME STUPID AND STUFF.

MIGUEL: ALL THEY WOULD DO IS THAT. THEY WOULDN'T EVEN TALK TO ME IN A FRIENDLY WAY.

ERIC: I HATED BEING TEASED SO MUCH.

TED SIZER: WHAT YOU WORRY ABOUT ARE THE KIDS WHO SEEM TO TAKE PLEASURE IN HARASSING AND INSULTING OTHER KIDS -- THE BULLIES.

M/N: EXCELLENT SCHOOLS PAY ATTENTION TO EMOTIONAL SAFETY. THAT MEANS THAT WHEN CHILDREN ARE TEASED, OR FRIGHTENED, OR BOTHERED, THEY FEEL COMFORTABLE TAKING THEIR PROBLEMS TO THE TEACHERS AND THE TEACHERS WILL NOT DISMISS THEM.

DEBORAH MEIER: WE TURN OUR BACKS ON A LOT OF THE CRUELTY THAT GOES ON BETWEEN CHILDREN IN SCHOOL BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT. A SAFE SCHOOL IS A SCHOOL WHICH FEELS THAT THEY'RE WILLING TO TACKLE THOSE. SO THEY CAN EVEN SAY, "STOP EVERYTHING! WE'RE NOT GOING TO MOVE UNTIL WE HAVE MADE SURE THIS ISN'T GOING TO HAPPEN AGAIN."

M/N: EXCELLENT SCHOOLS ARE ALSO INTELLECTUALLY SAFE, THAT IS, IT'S OKAY TO MAKE MISTAKES.

TED SIZER: THERE CAN'T BE A CLIMATE WHERE THE KIDS LAUGH AT THE WRONG ANSWER. A KID WILL IMMEDIATELY SHUT DOWN.

TED SIZER: THE ULTIMATE TEST OF A SCHOOL IS THE WILLINGNESS OF ANY STUDENT TO DISPLAY HER IGNORANCE. THE MOST RISKY THING YOU CAN DO IN A SCHOOL, WHATEVER YOUR AGE, IS TO SAY, "I DON'T KNOW. I REALLY DON'T KNOW. I DON'T GET IT."

M/N: INTELLECTUAL SAFETY, THE FREEDOM TO MAKE MISTAKES, ALLOWS FOR REAL TEACHING AND REAL LEARNING.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

JESSICA WILBERT: THE BEST TEACHER WILL CHALLENGE YOU, BUT AT THE SAME TIME, NOT, NOT INTIMIDATE YOU. I MEAN, I KNOW THE BIGGEST WAY TO KILL MY MOTIVATION, IS TO MAKE ME FEEL LIKE I'M TWO INCHES TALL.

TED SIZER: UNLESS THE KIDS CAN SAY, "I DON'T GET IT," OR, "I JUST ... I CAN'T ... I CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT," AND BE ABLE TO DO THAT, KNOWING THAT THE SCHOOL IS GONNA TRY TO FILL THAT VOID... THE SCHOOL THAT CAN DO THAT IS THE REALLY EXCELLENT SCHOOL.

MERROW: HOW DO THE ADULTS IN THE BUILDING ENCOURAGE THAT ATMOSPHERE?

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: WELL, I THINK THEY SHOULD MODEL IT. THAT'S WHAT I ALWAYS TRY TO DO. I THINK IT'S VERY IMPORTANT TO EMPHASIZE THAT KIND OF INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY, OPENNESS...

MERROW: SO IN AN EXCELLENT SCHOOL...

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: ...SAFETY, SAFETY TO SAY "I DON'T KNOW" AND SAFETY ALSO TO SAY "I DON'T AGREE."

M/N: IN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS, TEACHERS DO NOT DISMISS STUDENT ERRORS OR SIMPLY CORRECT THEM. INSTEAD THEY USE THEM CONSTRUCTIVELY.

ALFIE KOHN: LET'S SAY THE ANSWER TO A MATH PROBLEM IS SEVENTEEN AND A KID SAYS "EIGHTEEN." YOU KNOW, A LOT OF CARING TEACHERS IN THE GOOD ENOUGH CLASSROOM MIGHT SAY OOH, YOU'RE CLOSE, BUT TRYING TO BE SUPPORTIVE AND SYMPATHETIC, BUT SAYING, YOU HAVEN'T GOTTEN IT RIGHT. BUT THAT'S SILLY. BECAUSE WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW IS, HOW IS THE CHILD LOOKING AT THIS ISSUE? WHAT HAS HE GOTTEN OR FAILED TO QUITE GRASP THAT HAS LED TO THE ANSWER THAT HE OR SHE GOT TO? NOW YOU HAVE A CLASSROOM WHERE A. THINKING TENDS TO HAPPEN MORE, AND B. TEACHERS UNDERSTAND WHERE KIDS ARE FALLING SHORT AND WHY, AND SO THEY'RE IN A MUCH BETTER POSITION TO HELP THEM.

SCENE 4 [IN OFFICE]

MERROW: SO YOU SEE, MOST SCHOOLS ARE PHYSICALLY SAFE, BUT EMOTIONAL SAFETY, INTELLECTUAL SAFETY—THAT'S WHAT MAKES AN EXCELLENT SCHOOL. AND THERE IS A COMMON SENSE TEST.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

WOMAN: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

MERROW: LISTEN TO YOUR KIDS. THEY'LL TELL YOU—MAYBE NOT DIRECTLY—BUT THEY'LL TELL YOU WHEN THEY DON'T FEEL SAFE AT SCHOOL. WHEN THEY HAVE A LOT OF UNEXPLAINED ABSENCES, OR THEY DON'T WANT TO GET OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING — YOU KNOW, "MY TUMMY HURTS," THAT SORT OF THING.

WOMAN: SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING YOUR DOCTOR CAN'T CURE, BUT A VISIT TO YOUR SCHOOL MIGHT.

MERROW: NOW YOU'RE TALKING.

WOMAN: I'M IMPRESSED, MR. MERROW, BUT I SUSPECT THERE'S MORE TO SCHOOL THAN JUST GETTING THROUGH IT IN ONE PIECE. LOOK, I NEED ANSWERS. STIR THINGS UP FOR ME. OH, I ALMOST FORGOT— SWEETENER [SHE PUTS CASH ON THE TABLE]— FOR YOUR SERVICES.

MERROW: THANKS.

WOMAN: ANY IDEA WHERE YOU'LL START?

MERROW: SURE, IT'S ACADEMIC.

CHAPTER 2: ACADEMICS

SCENE 5 [IN OFFICE]

MERROW: I'D BEEN LOOKING INTO ACADEMIC QUALITY, PAST THE USUAL STUFF ABOUT TEST SCORES, AND I HAD PLENTY TO GIVE MY CLIENT.

WOMAN: SO MR. MERROW, GOT THE SKINNY ON ACADEMIC QUALITY?

MERROW: SURE DO LADY AND IT'S PURE SILK. THERE'S MORE TO QUALITY THAN TEST SCORES. AND ONCE AGAIN THERE'RE THREE KINDS OF SCHOOLS— BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT.

[FADE INTO DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL]

M/N: AT FIRST GLANCE IT SEEMS SIMPLE—IN GOOD-ENOUGH SCHOOLS CHILDREN ARE LEARNING; IN BAD SCHOOLS, THEY'RE NOT. TEST SCORES WILL TELL YOU THAT MUCH, BUT TO FIND EXCELLENCE, YOU NEED TO DIG DEEPER, ASK QUESTIONS, USE YOUR EYES AND EARS.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

M/N: START BY LOOKING AT CLASS SIZE. SMALL CLASSES— NO MORE THAN 20 STUDENTS— MEANS MORE ATTENTION FOR YOUR CHILD.

M/N: AND DON'T TAKE THE DISTRICT'S WORD ON CLASS SIZE. COUNT NAME TAGS ON CLASSROOM DOORS. THAT WAY YOU'LL KNOW WHEN SOMEONE'S TELLING YOU A FISH STORY.

M/N: INSIDE CLASSROOMS, LOOK FOR CLUES ABOUT ACADEMIC QUALITY IN THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE DESKS.

ALFIE KOHN: THE LAST THING YOU WANT TO SEE IS ROWS OF DESKS BEHIND EACH OTHER WITH EACH KID STRANDED ON HIS OR HER OWN DESK AS THOUGH ON A SEPARATE ISLAND. WHAT YOU WANT TO FIND A LOT OF TIMES IS KIDS IN SMALL GROUPS HUDDLING TOGETHER, CHALLENGING EACH OTHER IN A CARING WAY, AND FIGURING THINGS OUT DEEPLY.

M/N: LOOK CAREFULLY AT THE WALLS, TOO. WHAT DO YOU SEE IN BAD SCHOOLS?

TED SIZER: NOTHING, YOU KNOW, SCRUBBED CINDERBLOCK PAINTED LIGHT GREEN.

M/N: GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS COVER THEIR WALLS WITH INTERESTING PROJECTS, BUT WATCH OUT FOR CLASSROOMS WHERE MOST OF THE WORK LOOKS THE SAME. COOKIE-CUTTER WORK POINTS TO A SCHOOL THAT DOES NOT VALUE ORIGINAL THINKING.

ALFIE KOHN: KIDS HAVE LEARNED THAT THIS IS NOT ABOUT SOMETHING THAT THEY HAVE TO DO WHERE THEY'RE MAKING CHOICES. THEY'RE PRIMARILY FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS AND IT'S NOT ENGAGING AND IT'S NOT THAT MUCH FUN, BUT IT'S EASY.

M/N: WHAT YOU SEE IN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS LOOKS MORE LIKE THIS-- A WIDE VARIETY OF CHILDREN'S WORK SHOWING CREATIVITY AND EXPRESSION. AND IT DOESN'T JUST LOOK GOOD—IT CLEARLY SHOWS AN ACADEMIC PURPOSE.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: THE PRIMARY MISSION OF A SCHOOL IS AN ACADEMIC MISSION. YOU LOOK AT THE WALLS OF THE SCHOOL YOU SEE THE ART THEY'VE PRODUCED, ALL ON SUBJECT, MIND YOU, ALL REALLY RELATED TO LEARNING, NOT JUST FINGER PAINTING.

M/N: HERE'S SOMETHING ELSE TO LOOK FOR. THIS SCHOOL HAS LOTS OF INTERESTING WORK—ARTS AND CRAFTS, PAPER MACHE MODELS—SURE

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

SIGNS OF A GOOD SCHOOL. BUT NOTICE THE PLAQUE CREDITING THE STUDENTS WHO MADE IT -- TEN YEARS AGO. OLD WORK IS A SIGN OF A BAD SCHOOL.

M/N: LESS DRAMATIC IS WHEN WINTER'S WORK STILL HANGS IN SPRING. IN EITHER CASE, IT'S A SIGN OF STALLED ACTIVITY.

M/N: SO FIRST, LOOK CAREFULLY WHEN YOU VISIT YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL. THEN CLOSE YOUR EYES AND LISTEN.

TED SIZER: I THINK SILENCE IS, IN ALMOST EVERY CASE, A SIGN OF A WEAK SCHOOL.

DEBORAH MEIER: IF YOU HAVE A CLASSROOM WHERE KIDS NEVER TALK, KIDS AREN'T GOING TO LEARN HOW TO ARTICULATE THEIR IDEAS VERY WELL.

ALFIE KOHN: IN THE BEST KIND OF CLASSROOMS, THERE'S A HUM, THERE'S A BUZZ OF ACTIVITY OF KIDS FIGURING STUFF OUT AND CHALLENGING ONE ANOTHER AND TRYING ON IDEAS.

M/N: TO FIND EXCELLENCE PARENTS HAVE TO LISTEN IN OTHER PLACES, NOT JUST CLASSROOMS.

TED SIZER: LISTEN IN THE CAFETERIA. WHAT ARE THE KIDS TALKING ABOUT? YOU HAVE A TRAGEDY IN KOSOVO. DOES ANY SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD THINK ABOUT THAT? DO THEY KNOW WHERE KOSOVO IS? DO THEY UNDERSTAND THE RELIGIOUS CLASHES?

MERROW: AREN'T YOU SETTING THE BAR AWFULLY HIGH?

TED SIZER OH YEAH. WHY NOT? SURE. ABSOLUTELY. THESE ARE KIDS WHO ARE ALMOST OLD ENOUGH TO SERVE IN THE ARMY. THEY MIGHT GO TO KOSOVO.

TED SIZER: I MEAN THE REAL TEST OF GOOD SCHOOL IS NOT WHAT THEY DO WHEN YOU ASSIGN THEM A QUESTION. IT'S WHAT THEY DO WHEN YOU'RE NOT LOOKING.

M/N: IT'S NOT FAIR TO JUDGE A SCHOOL BASED ON WHAT YOU CAN SEE AND HEAR IN A SINGLE VISIT, AFTER ALL, YOUR SENSES CAN ONLY CARRY YOU SO FAR. PARENTS NEED TO DIG DEEPER, ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS, STARTING WITH WHO'S TEACHING THEIR CHILDREN.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

RICHARD INGERSOLL: EVERY YEAR, MILLIONS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE TAUGHT CORE ACADEMIC SUBJECTS BY TEACHERS WHO DO NOT HAVE EVEN A COLLEGE MINOR IN THE FIELD.

MERROW: MILLIONS?

INGERSOLL: MILLIONS, YES.

M/N: THAT INCLUDES TWENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF ALL ENGLISH AND HISTORY TEACHERS AND THIRTY PERCENT OF ALL MATH AND SCIENCE TEACHERS. BUT WELL TRAINED TEACHERS LIKE MICHAEL CARTWRIGHT OFTEN ARE SIMPLY ORDERED BY THEIR SCHOOL PRINCIPAL TO TEACH SUBJECTS THEY HAVEN'T STUDIED.

MICHAEL CARTWRIGHT: I DID A HORRIBLE JOB THE YEAR I TAUGHT HEALTH BECAUSE I COULDN'T DO THE, UH, TRYING TO THINK OF WHAT THE TERMS ARE. I COULDN'T DO THE CPR. I MEAN, LEGALLY I COULD NOT. IT WAS DANGEROUS. I COULDN'T DO THE HEIMLICH (SP?) MANEUVER BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW IT, AND I DIDN'T KNOW ALL THE DRUG NAMES FOR ALL THE DRUGS ARE OUT. KIDS ARE ASKING ME QUESTIONS AND I REFUSED TO DO SEX EDUCATION. I JUST DIDN'T DO IT.

M/N: ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS ABOUT TESTING, TOO. HOW MANY STANDARDIZED TESTS PER YEAR? HOW MUCH CLASS TIME WILL TEACHERS SPEND PRACTICING FOR TESTS?

REID SECHAN: WHAT ARE THE FOUR THINGS WE LOOK FOR IN CHARACTERIZATION? HURRY UP. COME ON, EVERYBODY.

M/N: IN THIS PUBLIC SCHOOL, CLASS TIME WAS IGAP TIME. THAT'S THE NAME OF THE STATE TEST THAT WAS GIVEN EVERY SPRING. TEST PREPARATION BEGAN SEVEN MONTHS EARLIER, IN OCTOBER, LESS THAN TWO MONTHS INTO THE SCHOOL YEAR.

STUDENT: EVERYTHING WE DO IS THE IGAP—IN EVERY CLASS, EVERY SUBJECT, THEY'RE TEACHING US ABOUT THE IGAP.

MERROW: ALL YOUR CLASSES?

STUDENT: ALL OF THEM. INCLUDING GYM.

MERROW: OH, COME ON.

STUDENT: AND MUSIC-- AND MUSIC TOO, CAUSE THEY HAVE A TEST ABOUT MUSIC ON IGAP. AND THAT'S WHAT WE DO IN MUSIC.

The Merrow Report

School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

M/N: UNFORTUNATELY, LOTS OF GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS USE CLASS TIME TO PRACTICE FOR STANDARDIZED TESTS. IT'S THE WRONG APPROACH. SCORES MAY GO UP, BUT THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION GOES DOWN.

MONTY NEILL: YOU DO NEED FACTS IN ORDER TO THINK IN A GIVEN AREA BUT IF ALL YOU DO IS MEMORIZE FACTS THE TENDENCY IS THE KIDS DON'T REMEMBER IT. IT BECOMES LIKE MEMORIZING A RANDOM LIST OF TELEPHONE NUMBERS. AND IT NARROWS THE CONTENT TOWARD VIRTUAL TRIVIA.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: THE WAY TO PREP FOR THEM IS TO HAVE A GOOD EDUCATION, AND THEN PEOPLE WILL THEN DISCOVER "OH, YES, IF WE DO ALL THESE THINGS THAT PRODUCE A GOOD EDUCATION, KIDS WILL ALSO DO WELL IN TESTS."

M/N: IT IS TEMPTING FOR SCHOOLS TO FOCUS ON THE KINDS OF QUESTIONS TESTS MAKERS ASK— MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS WITH CLEAR RIGHT AND WRONG ANSWERS. TEST SCORES CARRY ENORMOUS WEIGHT—JOBS, PRESTIGE, GRADUATION ARE ON THE LINE. BUT THE TEST MENTALITY OFTEN RUNS COUNTER TO GOOD EDUCATION.

TED SIZER: THE REAL WORLD IS NOT A SERIES OF SET, PRE-DIGESTED ANSWERS. THE REAL WORLD IS A SET OF QUESTIONS. TAKE THE ISSUE, -- AN ISSUE SO DIFFICULT THAT VERY FEW OF US WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT IN SCHOOLS -- AND THAT IS CLONING. THE BIOLOGY OF CLONING. BOY, THAT RAISES QUESTIONS. AND YOU KNOW, WHAT'S THE RIGHT ANSWER?

MERROW: EXCELLENCE...

TED SIZER: IS TALKING ABOUT THAT KIND OF ISSUE IN A VERY INFORMED WAY. WHAT'S THE BIOLOGY OF CLONING?

M/N: THERE'S ONE MORE MARK OF EXCELLENCE. IN THE BEST SCHOOLS, STUDENTS OFTEN USE WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING TO SOLVE REAL PROBLEMS, FOR INSTANCE, WHAT TO DO ABOUT RUN DOWN SCHOOLS.

ARNOLD PACKER: YOU'VE DONE STORIES, JOHN, WHERE YOU'VE SHOWN SCHOOLS THAT WERE IN DISREPAIR. IF YOU WERE TO SAY, "CHARLIE AND MARY WORK TOGETHER AND COME UP WITH A BUDGET FOR PAINTING THE SCHOOL BUILDING," AND THAT COULD BE AN ALGEBRA PROBLEM MUCH MORE INTERESTING THAN AN ALGEBRA PROBLEM ABOUT "WILL THE PLANE LEAVING CHICAGO MEET THE PLANE LEAVING LA?"

LISA DELPIT: WHEN THE SKILLS ARE MEANINGFUL, THAT'S WHEN WE, AS HUMAN BEINGS, LEARN. IF THEY'RE GIVEN ENOUGH OF A WONDER AT

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

THE UNIVERSE, THEN THEY WILL AND CAN CONTINUE TO LEARN ONCE THEY LEAVE YOU.

LISA DELPIT: IF THEY BELIEVE, ON THE OTHER HAND, THAT LEARNING IS JUST INCORPORATING EVERYTHING THE TEACHER SAYS AND THAT'S WHAT BEING SUCCESSFUL IN SCHOOL OR BEING A SUCCESSFUL LEARNER IS, WHEN THE TEACHER'S NOT THERE, THEN IT ENDS.

SCENE 6 [IN OFFICE]

WOMAN: SO THAT'S BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT ACADEMICS. I SUPPOSE THAT WRAPS UP THE CASE?

MERROW: I'M NOT SO SURE. JUST THINKING ABOUT PAINT JOBS WALKING THE HALLS REMINDS ME OF ALL THE OTHER TIDYING UP THAT SCHOOLS NEED.

WOMAN: I'VE HEARD THAT NEARLY HALF OF ALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS WERE BUILT NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO.

MERROW: YEAH. AND HOW COULD THEY POSSIBLY BE IN GOOD ENOUGH SHAPE TO BE EXCELLENT? CAN YOU EVEN HAVE AN EXCELLENT SCHOOL IN A NOT SO EXCELLENT BUILDING?

WOMAN: SO MANY QUESTIONS. I DON'T SUPPOSE WE'LL FIND ANY QUICK ANSWERS.

MERROW: NOT IN THIS BUSINESS, LADY. LOOK, LADY, AN INVESTIGATION LIKE THIS CAN LIGHTEN YOUR WALLET PRETTY QUICK. IF YOU WANT TO DROP THE CASE, I UNDERSTAND.

WOMAN: I'LL WORRY ABOUT MY WALLET, MR. MERROW. YOU WORRY ABOUT THE SCHOOLS. DIG INTO PHYSICAL CONDITIONS, THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT. I TOLD YOU, I NEED HELP CHOOSING. SOLVE THIS MYSTERY, AND I'LL DOUBLE YOUR FEE.

MERROW: I THINK I'M STARTING TO LIKE WORKING FOR YOU.

CHAPTER 3: PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

SCENE 7 [IN OFFICE]

MERROW [WITH PILES OF BLUE-PRINTS ON THE DESK]: I SPENT THE WHOLE NEXT DAY PORING OVER SCHOOL FACILITIES, TRYING TO PIN DOWN WHAT'S BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT. I'D LEARNED A LOT, MOSTLY THAT YOU CAN'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER, UNLESS, OF COURSE, THE COVER IS FALLING OFF.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

FADE INTO DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL

M/N: A LOT OF OUR SCHOOLS ARE IN TERRIBLE SHAPE. A RECENT STUDY ESTIMATED THE REPAIR BILL WOULD COME TO 268 BILLION DOLLARS. THE MOLD, MILDEW, AND POOR AIR QUALITY IN THESE DILAPIDATED SCHOOLS MAY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INCREASES IN CHILDHOOD DISEASES, INCLUDING ASTHMA.

M/N: WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR? CHECK OUT THE FRONT DOOR. IF YOU SEE SIGNS OF NEGLECT HERE, YOU'LL PROBABLY SEE MORE OF THE SAME INSIDE. LIKE DIRTY HALLWAYS, BROKEN BATHROOMS, RUNDOWN SCIENCE LABS, EVEN HOLES IN THE ROOF. EXTENSION CORDS ARE A SIGN OF A BAD ELECTRICAL SYSTEM. AN OLD BOILER CAN TURN CLASSROOMS INTO AN ICEBOX, OR A SWEATBOX. ALL THIS STEALS ATTENTION FROM LEARNING AND SENDS A POWERFUL MESSAGE TO THE KIDS.

TED SIZER: IF THE WALLS ARE DIRTY AND THE BATHROOMS ARE FOUL, IT SAYS SOMETHING TO THE KIDS. KIDS NOTICE THIS. YOU KNOW, THEY COULDN'T RESPECT US VERY MUCH OR THEY WOULDN'T TREAT WHERE I'M SUPPOSED TO BE WORKING SO SHODDILY.

M/N: TEACHERS GET THE MESSAGE TOO. CONDITIONS IN NANCY CARUSO'S HIGH SCHOOL WERE SO BAD THEY MADE TEACHING AN EVERYDAY STRUGGLE.

NANCY CARUSO: I HAD NO WATER AND I WAS SUPPOSED TO TEACH SCIENCE. I WAS TOTING WATER FROM A DECAIVING TOILET BASICALLY, LITTLE GALLON CONTAINERS, ONE AT A TIME AND IT WAS JUST VERY FRUSTRATING FOR ME.

M/N: SOMETHING ELSE THAT MAKES TEACHING HARD IS OVER-CROWDING. THAT'S EASY ENOUGH TO SPOT. JUST LOOK FOR PORTABLE CLASSROOMS ON SCHOOL GROUNDS, OR MAKESHIFT CLASSROOMS IN HALLWAYS, CAFETERIAS, AND GYMS.

MERROW: ALL THOSE KIDS IN THE HALL—ARE THEY YOUR KIDS?

TEACHER: YES, THEY WERE. YES, THEY WERE. THEY SHARE THEIR BOOKS AND THEY NEED SOME TIME TO SPREAD OUT AND I CAN'T DO IT IN MY CLASSROOM.

MERROW: I'VE NEVER HEARD OF FIRST GRADE WITH 48 KIDS. WHAT'S IT LIKE FOR YOU?

TEACHER: IT'S VERY, VERY DIFFICULT. IT'S VERY HARD TEACHING THEM HOW TO READ, TEACHING THEM ROUTINES. IT IS VERY, VERY DIFFICULT.

The Merrow Report

School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

M/N: GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS HAVE ROOM FOR CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY YOUNG CHILDREN. THEY NEED SPACE. GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS HAVE CLASSROOMS WITH A VARIETY OF ACTIVITY SPACES, INCLUDING LOTS OF BOOKS AND A PLACE FOR ARTS AND CRAFTS.

ALFIE KOHN: I LIKE TO SEE A SENSE OF WHAT SOMEBODY CALLED "PURPOSEFUL CLUTTER." IT'S THE KIND OF PLACE THAT FEELS WARM, BUT IT ALSO SHOWS EVIDENCE THAT KIDS ARE ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN THE LEARNING AND PROBLEM SOLVING THAT GOES ON THERE.

M/N: GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS ALSO HAVE PLENTY OF SUPPLIES, LIKE LOTS OF MATERIALS FOR CHILDREN TO HANDLE, CONSTRUCT, AND INVESTIGATE.

M/N: IT'S WORTH ASKING TEACHERS IF THEY'VE HAD TO BUY THEIR OWN SUPPLIES. IN GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS, THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE TO. GOOD ENOUGH HIGH SCHOOLS HAVE PLENTY OF BOOKS, AND THEY'RE IN GOOD CONDITION, NOT LIKE THE ONES THESE STUDENTS IN NEW HAMPSHIRE WERE READING.

STUDENT: I HAVE AN ENGLISH BOOK HERE. I HAVE SO MANY NOTES ON THIS BOOK THAT I HAVEN'T EVEN TAKEN. I MEAN EVERY PAGE IS FULL OF SCRIBBLE-OUTS AND UNDERLYING AND EVERY WORD HAS GOT A DEFINITION NEXT TO IT THAT MUST HAVE BEEN HERE FOR AT LEAST 10 YEARS. I START TO READ IN CLASS AND THEN I HAVE TO STOP EVERY FIVE MINUTES BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHAT A COUPLE WORDS ARE OR SENTENCES 'CAUSE THEY'RE ALL SCRIBBLED OUT.

M/N: IT PAYS TO TAKE A CLOSE LOOK YOUR CHILD'S TEXTBOOKS. HERE'S ONE I CAME ACROSS RECENTLY, AND HERE'S THE MAN IT LISTS AS PRESIDENT [SHOW REAGAN]. OLD TEXTBOOKS ARE A SIGN OF A BAD SCHOOL.

M/N: IN ADDITION TO BOOKS, GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS HAVE PLENTY OF COMPUTERS. BUT MORE IMPORTANT THAN HOW MANY MACHINES OR HOW NEW, IS HOW THE TECHNOLOGY IS BEING USED. THIS IS WHAT YOU'LL SEE IN BAD SCHOOLS AND IN MANY SCHOOLS THAT ARE JUST GOOD ENOUGH: TECHNOLOGY USED IN PREDICTABLE WAYS, MAINLY FOR DRILL AND PRACTICE.

LUYEN CHOU: I'VE SEEN SCHOOLS OUT THERE THAT HAVE UNBELIEVABLE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY THAT ARE REALLY DOING NOTHING MORE THAT WHAT THEY CAN DO WITH PAPER AND PENCIL.

M/N: EXCELLENT SCHOOLS USE TECHNOLOGY IN IMAGINATIVE

The Merrow Report

School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

WAYS—TO LET STUDENTS CREATE THEIR OWN ARTWORK, COMMUNICATE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN ANOTHER PART OF THE WORLD, EXPLORE A MUSEUM ON-LINE, OR FLY OVER THE SURFACE OF MARS.

LUYEN CHOU: I THINK THE EXCELLENCE COMES IN INSTILLING THAT SENSE OF PASSION IN KIDS, GETTING THEM TO BE ACTIVE LEARNERS, GETTING THEM TO STRIVE TO CREATE THEIR OWN KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD.

M/N: AS LONG AS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS ARE USING TECHNOLOGY CREATIVELY, IT'S OKAY IF THEY DON'T HAVE THE FASTEST COMPUTERS. BUT HIGH SCHOOLS, TO BE GOOD ENOUGH, HAVE TO BE UP-TO-DATE.

TED SIZER: BECAUSE THE... THE ABILITY TO GAIN ACCESS TO ALL SORTS OF INFORMATION IS JUST EXPLODING. YOU CAN DO SO MANY THINGS YOU COULDN'T DO THREE YEARS AGO AND IT IS -- PARTICULARLY FOR SCHOOLS THAT DON'T HAVE AN AWFUL LOT OF MONEY -- IT IS ACCESS TO A LIBRARY BEYOND YOUR WILDEST DREAMS.

M/N: HOWEVER, YOUR SCHOOL SHOULD HAVE ITS OWN LIBRARY. MAKE SURE YOU CHECK IT OUT. BAD ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS HAVE LIBRARIES LIKE THIS ONE, PERCHED ON A STAGE IN THE CAFETERIA. THESE BOOKS ARE OLD. A GOOD PLACE TO CHECK IS THE SCIENCE SECTION.

M/N: GOOD ENOUGH ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS HAVE REAL LIBRARIES, INVITING PLACES WHERE CHILDREN CAN CURL UP WITH A BOOK. THEY ALSO HAVE CERTIFIED LIBRARIANS— HALF OF ALL SCHOOLS DO NOT. THE BEST LIBRARIANS SPEND THEIR TIME HELPING TEACHERS AND STUDENTS FIND THE RIGHT BOOK. THEY'RE NOT THERE SIMPLY TO CHECK BOOKS IN AND OUT.

M/N: GOOD ENOUGH HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARIES ALLOW STUDENTS TO DIG DEEPER INTO THEIR SUBJECTS. EXCELLENT ONES ARE WIRED TO THE INTERNET, AND KEEP CD-ROMS AND THE LIKE IN EASY REACH OF STUDENTS.

M/N: OF COURSE, A SPIFFY, STATE-OF-THE-ART BUILDING DOESN'T GUARANTEE THAT THE SCHOOL IS EXCELLENT. BUT WITHOUT GOOD FACILITIES, EXCELLENCE IS AN UPHILL CLIMB.

LUYEN CHOU: IT'S CERTAINLY EASY TO EXCEL WHEN YOU FEEL A SENSE OF PRIDE ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL. ON THE OTHER HAND, I'VE SEEN SCHOOLS THAT ARE IN NO GREAT SHAPE TO LOOK AT WHERE THERE ARE TEACHERS AND THERE ARE STUDENTS WHO ARE EXCELLING DESPITE THE PHYSICAL PLANT.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

TED SIZER: OH, I'VE SEEN WONDERFUL SCHOOLS IN HOVELS AND I'VE SEEN WHAT I THOUGHT WERE TERRIBLE SCHOOLS IN PALACES.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: LET'S NOT FORGET THAT THE REAL FACILITIES ARE INVISIBLE. THE REAL FACILITIES IS IN WHAT KIND OF TRAINING DOES THIS TEACHER HAVE, WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE CLASSROOM, AND WHAT IS THE CHILD ACTUALLY LEARNING— WHAT'S GOING INTO THE CHILD'S MIND AND IS THE CHILD BEING INSPIRED, AND THAT CAN HAPPEN IN A HOVEL. IT SHOULDN'T HAPPEN IN A HOVEL, BUT IT CAN.

TED SIZER: AND I WOULD WISH A HOVEL ON NO ONE. THE TOOLS HAVE TO BE THERE. YOU CAN'T TEACH SERIOUS SCIENCE WITHOUT LABORATORIES. YOU CAN'T TEACH SERIOUS HISTORY WITHOUT A COMBINATION OF ACCESS TO THE INTERNET AND A FIRST CLASS LIBRARY, AND A FIRST CLASS LIBRARIAN. AND SO I LOOK FOR THOSE ... LOOK FOR THOSE THINGS.

SCENE EIGHT [IN OFFICE]

MERROW: THAT'S WHAT I PUT DOWN IN MY REPORT TO MY CLIENT, ALONG WITH A NOTE I SCRIBBLED TO COME TO MY OFFICE THE NEXT DAY. I GOT THERE FIRST, LUCKY FOR HER, UNLUCKY FOR ME.

SCENE NINE [IN OFFICE]

TOUGH GUY: WELL, IF IT ISN'T MR. SCHOOL SLEUTH HIMSELF.

MERROW: HOW'D YOU GET IN HERE?

TOUGH GUY: WE CAN GO WHEREVER WE WANT. MATTER OF FACT, I'M JUST PERUSING SOME OF YOUR FILES. SAFETY, ACADEMIC QUALITY, and PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT. WHAT'S BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT. INTERESTING CASE, MERROW. TOO BAD YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO DROP IT.

MERROW: DROP IT. SAYS WHO?

TOUGH GUY: THE STATUS QUO, THAT'S WHO. THE FOLKS WHO LIKE SCHOOLS JUST THE WAY THEY ARE. YOU'RE MAKING GOOD ENOUGH SCHOOLS LOOK BAD ENOUGH AND BAD SCHOOLS LOOK WORSE.

MERROW: GEE, I'M REALLY SORRY.

TOUGH GUY: SORRY, SORRY??? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHO MESS WITH THE STATUS QUO?

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

MERROW: NO. WHY DON'T YOU SHOW ME?

TOUGH GUY: GLADLY. [PUNCHES MERROW]

CHAPTER 4: ADULTS

SCENE 10 [IN OFFICE]

WOMAN: MR. MERROW, MR. MERROW, MR. MERROW, CAN YOU HEAR ME?
OH, YOU'RE A MESS. WHAT HAPPENED? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

MERROW: I'M ALL RIGHT. SOME GOOD TRIED TO MUSCLE ME OFF THE
CASE. WORKED ME OVER PRETTY GOOD. YOU GET MY REPORT?

WOMAN: YES. ABOUT SCHOOL FACILITIES. NICE WORK.

MERROW: YEAH, WELL THERE'S MORE TO THIS CASE OF AN EXCELLENT
SCHOOL. AFTER I FINISHED POKING AROUND INTO SCHOOL FACILITIES, I
STARTED ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ADULTS IN CHARGE—
ADMINISTRATORS, PRINCIPALS, AND TEACHERS. TURNS OUT THAT'S A
BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT SITUATION TOO.

WOMAN: REALLY? TELL ME MORE...

[FADE INTO DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL]

M/N: EXCELLENCE BEGINS AT THE TOP— WITH PRINCIPALS.

MERROW: SAY I COME INTO THE SCHOOL AND THE PRINCIPAL IS IN
HIS OFFICE.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: OK

MERROW: AND I COME IN AGAIN -- IN HIS OR HER OFFICE, EVERY TIME I
COME IN THE PRINCIPAL IS IN HIS OR HER OFFICE. GOOD SIGN? BAD SIGN?

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: BAD SIGN. YEAH, A BAD SIGN BECAUSE HOW DO YOU
KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON UNLESS YOU'RE GOING AROUND, FINDING OUT,
SITTING IN, MAKING EVERYBODY THINK THAT YOU ARE WATCHING
OVER.

M/N: MARSHA CAPUANO WAS AN EXCELLENT PRINCIPAL IN HARSHMAN
MIDDLE SCHOOL IN INDIANAPOLIS. SHE SEEMED TO SPEND MOST OF HER
TIME IN THE CLASSROOMS AND HALLS, GETTING TO KNOW HER
STUDENTS.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

MERROW: YOU DON'T SEEM TO SPEND A WHOLE LOT OF TIME SITTING BEHIND YOUR DESK.

MARSHA CAPUANO: NO, I DON'T. AND THAT FRUSTRATES SOME PEOPLE.

MERROW: GOOD PRINCIPAL SHOULD BE IN THE OFFICE?

MARSHA CAPUANO: THAT'S RIGHT, MM-HMM. AND THAT'S NOT WHERE THE ACTION IS.

M/N: THE ACTION IS IN HALLWAYS AND CLASSROOMS AND THAT'S WHERE EXCELLENT PRINCIPALS CAN USUALLY BE FOUND, GETTING TO KNOW STUDENTS.

M/N: MARSHA CAPUANO WAS AN EXCELLENT PRINCIPAL, AT HARSHMAN MIDDLE SCHOOL IN INDIANAPOLIS. SHE SEEMED TO SPEND MOST OF HER TIME IN CLASSROOMS AND HALLS, GETTING TO KNOW HER STUDENTS.

MARSHA CAPUANO: I DON'T ALWAYS KNOW ALL THEIR LAST NAMES AND NOT ALL THEIR, THEIR FIRST NAMES BUT, YOU SEE THEM IN THE HALLS AND YOU SEE THEM IN THE CAFETERIA AND YOU SEE 'EM OUT AT THE BUSES AND I DON'T KNOW ANY OTHER WAY TO KNOW THE CHILDREN UNLESS YOU KNOW WHO THEY ARE.

M/N: EXCELLENT PRINCIPALS ALSO KNOW THAT THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF SCHOOL IS ACADEMIC.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: THE FIRST SIGN OF EXCELLENCE IS TO TAKE ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP. RIGHT NOW, I THINK, MANY PRINCIPALS CONSIDER THEMSELVES ADMINISTRATORS AND SOMEBODY ELSE IS IN CHARGE OF THE ACADEMICS.

LISA DELPIT: A BAD PRINCIPAL IS ONE WHO NEVER GOES INTO THE CLASSROOMS, WHO SPENDS ALL OF THEIR TIME IN THE OFFICE, DEALING WITH WHATEVER ISSUES ARE THERE, WHO FOCUSES MORE ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SCHOOL THAN ON THE INSTRUCTION THAT GOES ON IN THE SCHOOL.

M/N: PRINCIPALS WHO PUT ACADEMICS FIRST DON'T INTERRUPT CLASSES WITH ANNOUNCEMENTS OVER THE P.A.

LISA DELPIT: OH, I REALLY DON'T LIKE THE PA ANNOUNCEMENTS.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: WE TURN IT OFF.

LISA DELPIT: I DON'T THINK VERY MANY PEOPLE LISTEN TO THEM.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: I FIND IT'S VERY DISTRACTING. IT'S OUTRAGEOUS.

M/N: ANOTHER WAY TO PICK UP CLUES ABOUT YOUR PRINCIPAL--SIT IN ON A FACULTY MEETING.

MERROW: P'SSST...BAD PRINCIPALS MONOPOLIZE MEETINGS AND TALK ABOUT ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS— NOT MUCH ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING. TEACHERS LEARN PRETTY QUICKLY TO SIT IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM. MAYBE THEY GRADE PAPERS, MAYBE THEY DON'T.

ALFIE KOHN: I THINK THE EXCELLENT PRINCIPAL DOESN'T RUN MOST OF THE FACULTY MEETINGS, FOR EXAMPLE, BUT LETS THAT RESPONSIBILITY ROTATE AMONG ALL THE INTERESTED STAFF MEMBERS -- AGAIN, NOT ONLY EMPOWERING TEACHERS, BUT MODELING FOR TEACHERS THE WAY A MORE DEMOCRATIC AND EXCELLENT CLASSROOM WOULD LOOK.

M/N: EXCELLENT PRINCIPALS PROTECT TEACHERS, STAND UP FOR THEM.

LISA DELPIT: THE GOOD PRINCIPAL ACTUALLY IS THE ONE WHO WOULD PUT HIS OR HER JOB ON THE LINE, IN MY ESTIMATION, TO PROTECT THE TEACHERS TO ALLOW THEM TO DO THE KINDS OF TEACHING THAT THEY KNOW WOULD MAKE SENSE.

LOUIS V. GERSTNER: THEY DON'T GET DICTATED FROM SOME CENTRAL AUTHORITY THAT, HERE'S WHAT YOU DO, HERE'S WHAT YOU TEACH, THIS MANY HOURS, THIS MANY MINUTES, THIS MANY TIMES A DAY... THEY REALLY TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE THOSE CHILDREN AND THEY STAND ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE RESULTS, BUT THEY'RE GIVEN THE FREEDOM TO MANAGE THAT ENVIRONMENT.

M/N: EXCELLENT PRINCIPALS GIVE TEACHERS RESPECT, SUPPORT, CONTROL OVER THEIR CLASSROOMS AND A SAY IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE. THEN TEACHERS ARE NOT LIKELY TO RETIRE ON THE JOB OR BURN OUT. UNFORTUNATELY, EXCELLENCE IS RARE, BURNOUT IS NOT.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: THERE'S MORE THAN AVERAGE BURNOUT IN PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHING, AND WE ALL KNOW THAT. THE SYSTEM IS OPPRESSIVE, THE SYSTEM HAS RULES AND REGULATIONS, IT HAS NO COHERENCE, IT'S INFESTED WITH POLITICS. YES, IF A PRINCIPAL, THAT'S WHERE LEADERSHIP COMES IN, IF YOU HAVE A LEADER WHERE TEACHER MORALE, CLASSROOM MORALE IS HIGH, YOU'RE LESS LIKELY TO HAVE BURNOUT.

SCENE 11 [IN OFFICE]

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

WOMAN: SO AN EXCELLENT PRINCIPAL MAKES A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE.

MERROW: YOU GOT IT, LADY. BUT CLASSROOM TEACHER FIGURES MORE INTO A KID'S EDUCATION. THERE TOO, YOU'VE GOT TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT.

FADE INTO DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL

M/N: EXCELLENT TEACHERS HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR STUDENTS. BAD TEACHERS DO NOT.

LAUREN RESNICK: WE BELIEVE, DEEP DOWN, MOST AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT SOME PEOPLE ARE SMART AND SOME AREN'T. AND SO YOU CAN EXPECT SOME TO LEARN AND OTHERS NOT TO.

M/N: TEACHERS WITH THAT ATTITUDE ARE THE ONES WHO FREQUENTLY PUT STUDENTS DOWN.

LISA DELPIT: NOW IF THE TEACHER IS YELLING, "YOU ARE JUST SO DUMB. YOU NEVER DO ANYTHING RIGHT, I DON'T SEE HOW YOU'RE EVER GOING TO MAKE IT THROUGH MIDDLE SCHOOL. LOOK AT THIS," THAT'S NOT A GOOD TEACHER.

M/N: TEACHERS LIKE THAT ARE QUICK TO MAKE EXCUSES FOR WHY MOST OF THEIR STUDENTS ARE NOT LEARNING -- BECAUSE THEY'RE DISADVANTAGED, BECAUSE THEY JUST DON'T CARE, BECAUSE THEY'RE LEARNING DISABLED, EVEN ADD.

LAUREN RESNICK: NOW I DON'T BELIEVE THAT SOME CAN LEARN AND SOME, CAN'T. I REALLY DO BELIEVE THAT EVERYBODY CAN AND I BELIEVE IT BECAUSE I'VE SEEN IT.

M/N: GOOD ENOUGH TEACHERS BELIEVE THAT ALL CHILDREN CAN LEARN. EXCELLENT TEACHERS MAKE IT HAPPEN.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: BECAUSE THE RESULTS SHOW IT, THE TEST SCORES. AND THERE'S A LOT OF "WE'RE GOING TO WORK AT THIS UNTIL WE GET IT, YOU HAVEN'T MASTERED THIS BUT WE'RE GOING TO MASTER IT." THERE'S A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF PUSHING THAT IS CHARACTERISTIC, I THINK OF REALLY GOOD TEACHING...WHEN YOU PUSH THE ENVELOPE.

M/N: PUSHING THE ENVELOPE MAY REQUIRE RAISING YOUR VOICE, YELLING, BUT IT'S GOOD YELLING.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

LISA DELPIT: WHAT GOOD YELLING IS IF THE TEACHER SAYS, "YOU ARE TOO SMART TO GIVE ME WORK LIKE THIS. DO YOU SEE THIS? NOW I KNOW YOU ARE BRILLIANT, I HAVE WORKED WITH YOU BEFORE AND I KNOW THIS. HOW CAN YOU GIVE ME THIS KIND OF INFORMATION ON THIS PAPER?"

MERROW: THAT'S GOOD YELLING?

LISA DELPIT: THAT'S GOOD, YELLING.

M/N: ANOTHER SIGN OF A OF EXCELLENCE— SOMETHING PARENTS SHOULD PAY ATTENTION TO— IS THE WAY THEY GRADE HOMEWORK. THE MORE COMMENTS THE BETTER.

LUYEN CHOU: GRADING IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH THE STUDENT, ABOUT SOMETHING CONCRETE, ABOUT A STUDENT'S WORK, AND WHAT YOU SAY TO THEM MEANS A LOT. I KNOW EVEN ON ASSIGNMENTS THAT I DID AS A STUDENT WHERE A GOT VERY GOOD MARKS, THAT I'D BE VERY DISAPPOINTED IF I JUST GOT AN A OR AN A- OR A B+. I WANTED TO KNOW WHY THIS PAPER OR THIS DOCUMENT WAS AN A OR AN A- OR A B+, AND SO I THINK AS A TEACHER YOU LOSE AN OPPORTUNITY IF THAT'S ALL YOU DO.

M/N: SOME HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME FOR GRADING PAPERS, BECAUSE THEY HAVE TOO MANY STUDENTS. A FEW YEARS AGO, I MET HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER CHIP NYAN.

CHIP NYAN: I HAVE A HUNDRED AND EIGHTY THREE STUDENTS, AND I'M PRETTY TIRED BY THE END OF THE DAY. IT'S TOUGH, IT GETS WEARING, IT'S HARD TO GO HOME AND CORRECT TESTS. YOU NEVER SEEM TO BE CAUGHT UP.

TED SIZER: HOW MANY KIDS DO YOU HAVE TO GET TO KNOW? IF YOU SAY, "65," I'D SAY YOU HAVE A SHOT AT IT, BUT IF YOU SAY, "165," I'D SAY, "JOHN, YOU'RE JUST IN THE CROWD CONTROL BUSINESS."

M/N: TEACHING IS A TOUGH PROFESSION. GOOD ENOUGH TEACHERS WORK HARD. EXCELLENT TEACHERS GO THE EXTRA MILE FOR THEIR STUDENTS. HOW CAN YOU TELL? VISIT THE PARKING LOT. IT'S A BAD SIGN IF IT'S ALWAYS EMPTY 20 MINUTES AFTER THE SCHOOL DAY ENDS. IN SCHOOLS WITH DEDICATED STAFF, TEACHERS TEND TO ARRIVE EARLY AND STICK AROUND LATE. IN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS, THERE'S A BUZZ OF ACTIVITY EVEN AFTER DISMISSAL.

LISA DELPIT: I WAS IN A SCHOOL ON FRIDAY, AND SCHOOL ENDED AT THREE, AND NONE OF THE KIDS WOULD LEAVE - ON A FRIDAY - AND I

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

LOOKED AROUND AND TOLD THE ADMINISTRATOR, "THIS IS SAYING SOMETHING, IF YOU'RE KIDS DON'T WANT TO LEAVE."

MERROW: AND IT'S SAYING...

LISA DELPIT: IT'S SAYING IT'S A GOOD PLACE TO BE. IT FEELS GOOD HERE, THIS IS A PLACE AND A SPACE THAT I WANT TO SAY IN.

M/N: IN THOSE RARE SCHOOLS, THE KIND THAT STUDENTS DON'T WANT TO LEAVE, TEACHERS GENUINELY CARE ABOUT THE KIDS, AND THAT'S THE FINAL MARK OF EXCELLENCE.

DEBORAH MEIER: I'D RATHER HAVE MY CHILD OR MY GRANDCHILD IN A CLASSROOM WHOSE CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY I'M NOT SO CRAZY ABOUT BUT WHOSE TEACHER CERTAINLY LIKES AND RESPECTS THEM. THAT'S ALSO THE BOTTOM LINE OF THE SCHOOL. THERE'RE SOME SCHOOLS THAT SEEM TO LIKE KIDS. THEY JUST ... YOU FEEL IT ABOUT THE PLACE... THIS IS A PLACE THAT LIKES KIDS. AND IT LIKES EVEN THEIR NAUGHTINESS, THEY DON'T TELL THE KIDS THAT THEY LIKE THEIR NAUGHTINESS, BUT YOU CAN TELL BY THE TONE OF THEIR VOICE, THE EXPRESSION, BY LISTENING TO THEM IN THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE, THAT THEY REALLY JUST PLAIN ENJOY THESE CHILDREN. THINK THEY ARE FUN. THEY ARE ADORABLE. THEY ARE LOVABLE. THEY'RE CHILDREN ... THEY ~~COULD BE MY CHILDREN.~~

SCENE 12 IN OFFICE
MERROW: SO YOU SEE, PEOPLE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF ANY SCHOOL, AND YOU CAN'T HAVE EXCELLENCE WITHOUT LEADERSHIP. STILL, IT'S A CRAZY WORLD OUT THERE WITH LOTS OF OBSTACLES TO FINDING AND KEEPING GOOD PEOPLE -- LOUSY WORKING CONDITIONS, MEDDLING SCHOOL BOARDS, LOW SALARIES, NOT TO MENTION AN INDIFFERENT PUBLIC AND SLUGGISH BUREAUCRACIES. I'M NOT SUGARCOATING THIS FOR YOU, LADY.

WOMAN: COME ON, MR. MERROW, YOU'RE BRINGING ME DOWN. WHERE'S THE GOOD NEWS?

MERROW V/O: I NEEDED TO SAY SOMETHING, DO SOMETHING TO CHEER HER UP. LUCKY FOR ME, I HAD AN ACE UP MY SLEEVE.

MERROW: I NEED JUST ONE MORE DAY TO CRACK THIS CASE. WE'LL BUST IT WIDE OPEN, THROW THE BOOK AT THE STATUS QUO AND THEIR TWO-BIT SOLDIERS.

WOMAN: THAT'S MORE LIKE IT.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

MERROW: AND LADY, THIS DAY'S ON ME.

WOMAN: YOU'RE SWEET.

CHAPTER 5: SENSE OF PURPOSE

SCENE 13 [IN OFFICE]

WOMAN: SO YOU THINK YOU'VE SOLVED THIS CASE?

MERROW: GIFT WRAPPED AND READY TO GO.

WOMAN: THAT'S WONDERFUL NEWS. I'M SO EXCITED.

MERROW: THIS WASN'T AN OPEN AND SHUT AFFAIR. LUCKY, I CAUGHT A BREAK. MY ASSOCIATES PICKED UP THAT THUG WHO ROUGHED ME LAST NIGHT. BROUGHT HIM IN FOR QUESTIONING.

SCENE 14 [IN WAREHOUSE]

THUG: DUST OFF, SCHOOL SLEUTH. YOU GOT NOTHING ON ME.

MERROW: NOTHING? AFTER ALL WE'VE SEEN— SAFETY, ACADEMIC QUALITY, PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, THE ADULTS IN THE BUILDING— THAT'S NOTHING? YOU MUST BE A GRADUATE OF ONE OF THOSE "GOOD ENOUGH" SCHOOLS. TALK NOW, MR. STATUS QUO, OR YOU'RE COOKED.

THUG: ALRIGHT, YOU WIN. I'LL SPILL.

MERROW V/O: AND HE DID, DOWN TO THE LAST DROP. HE CONFESSED THAT EXCELLENT SCHOOLS KNOW WHAT THEY STAND FOR, THEY HAVE A SENSE OF PURPOSE.

[FADE INTO DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL]

DEBORAH MEIER: IT'S PURPOSE THAT SHOULD BE THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF KIDS. KIDS SHOULD BE ABLE TO EXHIBIT SERIOUS THOUGHTFUL HABITS OF MIND.

JAMES COMER: THE FOCUS IS ALWAYS ON THE CHILD. THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF A SCHOOL, THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF AN EDUCATION, THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF HAVING TEACHERS, CUSTODIANS, BUILDINGS, IS TO HELP THE CHILD LEARN, GROW, DEVELOP.

The Merrow Report

School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

M/N: SCHOOLS WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE KNOW THEIR GOALS. TEACHERS CAN TELL PARENTS EXACTLY WHAT THE CHILDREN ARE GOING TO BE DOING, EXACTLY WHAT THEY'RE GOING TO LEARN.

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: GO ASK YOUR SCHOOL "WHAT IS MY CHILD SUPPOSED TO LEARN THIS YEAR?" AND IF THEY GIVE YOU A LOT OF VAGUE STUFF ABOUT GETTING ALONG WITH PEOPLE, COOPERATING, LEARNING ABOUT OTHER CULTURES, AND SO ON, EXTREMELY VAGUE ANSWERS, THEN THAT'S A DANGER SIGNAL.

MERROW: WHAT'S A GOOD ANSWER?

E.D. HIRSCH, JR: A GOOD ANSWER IS THAT WE'RE LEARNING ABOUT EGYPT AND MESOPOTAMIA AND FARMING AND EARLY PAINTING AND SO ON, AND YOU HAVE SOMETHING QUITE SPECIFIC.

M/N: IN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS TEACHERS CAN NOT ONLY TELL YOU WHAT YOUR CHILD IS LEARNING, THEY ALSO KNOW WHAT OTHER CHILDREN, IN OTHER GRADES ARE LEARNING. THAT'S RARE.

LISA DELPIT: YOU KNOW, FIRST GRADE TEACHERS NEVER SPEND TIME IN THE FIFTH GRADE TEACHERS CLASS, AND I THINK WE NEED TO HAVE THAT HAPPEN. I THINK WE NEED THE FIFTH GRADE TEACHER TO SPEND TIME IN THE FIRST GRADE CLASS. OTHERWISE WHAT I CONTINUE TO SEE IS THAT WE OFTEN IN OUR SCHOOLS DO THE SAME THING YEAR AFTER YEAR AFTER YEAR AND NEVER MOVE ONTO NEW MATERIAL.

M/N: IN PURPOSEFUL SCHOOLS, LEARNING FOLLOWS A CLEAR PATH FROM YEAR TO YEAR. AND WITHIN EACH GRADE THERE'S PLANNING TO MAKE SURE SUBJECTS CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER. THAT'S ANOTHER SIGN OF EXCELLENCE.

HENRY LEVIN: SO THE MIDDLE SCHOOL, FOR EXAMPLE, YOU ARE GOING TO SEE OFTEN A HUMANITIES CURRICULUM THAT COMBINES LANGUAGE, ENGLISH, SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE ARTS. IT'S SOMETHING VERY EXCITING WHERE THE KIDS BECOME DETECTIVES AND LOOKING AT WORKS OF ART, TRYING TO DEDUCE WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY THAT WAS, HOW PEOPLE RELATED TO EACH OTHER, WAS THERE EQUALITY OR INEQUALITY, AND SO ON, BUT YOU'LL FIND THAT GOING ACROSS ALL OF THE CLASSROOMS.

M/N: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SUBJECTS ARE EVERYWHERE IN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS. LIKE THIS ONE, WHERE GYM CLASS STARTS WITH AN EXERCISE IN LITERACY.

M/N: IF THAT'S EXCELLENT, WHAT'S BAD?

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

TED SIZER: A MINDLESS SCHOOL, A SCHOOL THAT YOU KNOW HAS NINE PERIODS A DAY (LAUGHS) WHERE FRENCH HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH ENGLISH AND PHYSICS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MATH.

M/N: BUT THAT'S EXACTLY HOW MANY "GOOD ENOUGH" SCHOOLS ARE RUN. WHY? BECAUSE IT'S EASIER.

LUYEN CHOU: YOU DON'T HAVE TO TALK TO THE MATH TEACHER IF YOU'RE THE SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER, YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO GET STUDENTS TO DO PROJECTS THAT COME ACROSS THESE DISCIPLINARY LINES. THE GREAT SCHOOLS THAT I'VE SEEN ARE ONES THAT HAVE TAKEN THAT CHALLENGE AND HAVE REALLY RUN WITH IT AND HAVE REALLY CREATED CURRICULUMS THAT HAVE FORCED STUDENTS AND TEACHERS TO THINK ACROSS THOSE LINES.

M/N: OF COURSE A GREAT CURRICULUM IS ONLY A STARTING POINT, YOU'VE ALSO GOT TO KNOW HOW MUCH CHILDREN ARE LEARNING. EXCELLENT SCHOOLS MONITOR STUDENTS' PROGRESS, AND INTERVENE ACCORDINGLY. AT GREEN HOLLY ELEMENTARY, STUDENTS ARE TESTED FREQUENTLY, NOT TO GIVE GRADES BUT TO PROVIDE A DIAGNOSIS.

ROBERT SLAVIN: I DON'T APOLOGIZE FOR THE FREQUENT ASSESSMENT AT ALL. LIKE IF YOU WERE IN A SMALL BUSINESS YOU'D WANT TO KNOW ARE WE MAKING MONEY THIS MONTH? ARE WE NOT MAKING MONEY THIS MONTH? WHICH OF OUR PRODUCT LINES ARE WORKING? WHICH ARE NOT? YOU KNOW, DID OUR ADVERTISING STRATEGY PAY OFF OR DIDN'T IT? YOU KNOW, YOU'D BE CRAZY AS A SMALL BUSINESS OWNER NOT TO BE LOOKING FOR THAT KIND OF INFORMATION. YOU'D GO BROKE IN A YEAR. AND A SCHOOL NEEDS TO BE THINKING ALONG VERY SIMILAR LINES.

M/N: A SENSE OF PURPOSE— KNOWING WHERE YOU'RE GOING AND WHETHER YOU'RE ACTUALLY HEADED IN THAT DIRECTION—DOES NOT HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT. IT TAKES TIME FOR TEACHERS TO MEET AND PLAN. THAT'S SOMETHING MOST TEACHERS AND MOST SCHOOLS DO NOT GET.

DEBORAH MEIER: WE MADE A BIG MISTAKE IN THINKING TEACHERS' TIME IN SCHOOL IS THE SAME AS KIDS' TIME. KIDS COME IN 8:30, TEACHERS COME IN 8:30, TEACHERS SHOULD COME IN 8:30. KIDS GO HOME AT 3:00, TEACHERS SHOULD GO HOME AT 3:00. SCHOOL STARTS SEPTEMBER 2ND, TEACHERS SHOULD GET THERE SEPTEMBER 1ST. WE DON'T SET UP SUMMER CAMPS THAT STUPIDLY.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

MERROW: DO YOU HAVE A SENSE, DON, OF IN AN EXCELLENT SCHOOL HOW MUCH TIME TEACHER'S HAVE TO TALK TO THEIR COLLEAGUES, TO PREPARE?

E.D. HIRSCH, JR.: LOTS.

TED SIZER: I'VE WORKED IN A SCHOOL THAT'S DONE IT -- TWO HOURS A DAY.

DEBORAH MEIER: WE SPEND THREE WEEKS TOGETHER OVER THE SUMMER, WE SPEND 5 HOURS A WEEK, 5 COLLECTIVE HOURS TOGETHER, DEALING WITH INTELLECTUAL, PEDAGOGICAL, AND CURRICULAR PROBLEMS THE SCHOOL FACES.

TED SIZER: THIS IS ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A REALLY GOOD SCHOOL WHERE TEACHERS GET TOGETHER AND WORK TOGETHER TO DECIDE ON SCHOOL POLICY, TEACHING POLICY, ON THE SUBSTANCE OF WHAT THEY'RE TEACHING.

DEBORAH MEIER: IT'S NOT ENOUGH JUST TO BE PRESENT WITH THE KIDS, IT'S ENOUGH JUST TO STUDY THEIR HOMEWORK, YOU GO TO KEEP YOUR OWN CRAFT MOVING ALONG.

M/N: IN SCHOOLS WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE, TEACHERS DEVELOP A LIKING FOR EACH OTHER, AND A SENSE OF TRUST. THERE ARE SIGNS OF THAT TOO.

TED SIZER: IF YOU AND I WERE WANDERING AROUND THE SCHOOL, I WOULD LIKE TO BE ABLE TO SEE OPEN DOORS WHERE THERE IS SERIOUS DISCUSSION OF WORK THAT THE KIDS HAD DONE THEMSELVES.

MERROW OPEN DOORS?

TED SIZER OPEN DOORS.

MERROW: A LOT OF TEACHERS CLOSE THEIR DOORS.

TED SIZER: YEAH, AND THAT'S ... I DON'T KNOW MANY ARCHITECTS OFFICES THAT ARE VERY EFFICIENT WITH CLOSED DOORS. I DON'T KNOW OF MANY SCHOOLS WHICH -- IDEAL SCHOOLS -- WHICH NEED TO CLOSE THE DOORS ALL THE TIME.

M/N: OPEN DOORS TELL YOU THAT TEACHERS SHARE, COOPERATE, COMMUNICATE. THERE'S A FEELING OF COMMUNITY IN SCHOOLS WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

JAMES COMER: YOU SENSE A SPIRIT IN THIS BUILDING, THE WAY THE TEACHERS AND THE, THE CLERKS AND THE CUSTODIANS AND EVERY, AND THE CHILDREN, THE WAY THEY ALL FEEL. THEY LIKE EACH OTHER; THEY COOPERATE WITH EACH OTHER. ALL OF THAT MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR THE ADULTS TO HELP THE CHILDREN GROW.

M/N: OF COURSE, IN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS, PARENTS FEEL THEY'RE PART OF THE COMMUNITY TOO. ONE GOOD TEST IS WHETHER IT'S DIFFICULT FOR THEM TO VISIT.

LISA DELPIT: I WOULD SAY EXCELLENT SCHOOLS HAVE OPEN DOORS FOR PARENTS AND BEYOND OPEN DOORS WELCOME PARENTS WHEN THEY ENTER AND HAVE THINGS THAT PARENTS CAN DO. CAN I SHOW YOU TO A CHILD'S CLASS? WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO SOME THINGS TO HELP YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER? SHE HAS A FOLDER HERE OF THINGS THAT SHE'D LIKE DONE, IF ANYONE HAS TIME TO DO THEM.

M/N: IN SCHOOLS WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE EVERYONE HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO FURTHER THE ACADEMIC MISSION, INCLUDING STUDENTS THEMSELVES. HOW? BY HELPING OUT IN THE CLASSROOM, BY ACTING AS READING BUDDIES, TUTORS AND MENTORS. THEY'RE LOTS OF WAYS KIDS CAN GIVE BACK, AS LONG AS SCHOOLS ARE OPEN MINDED ENOUGH TO LET THEM.

ALFIE KOHN: I WONDER HOW MUCH ARE KIDS INCLUDED IN THINKING ABOUT WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL DO WANT TO HAVE. WHAT SHOULD WE PUT HERE? HOW SHOULD THE LUNCHROOM FUNCTION? WHAT TABLES SHOULD WE HAVE? ARE ROUND TABLES MORE CONDUCIVE TO A HUMANE LUNCH EATING EXPERIENCE THAN LONG RECTANGULAR TABLES? ASK THE KIDS.

M/N: IN EXCELLENT SCHOOLS CHILDREN DISCUSS THE KIND OF CLASSROOM THEY WANT THEN HELP WRITE THE CLASSROOM RULES, THAT WAY THEY'RE MORE LIKELY TO FOLLOW THEM. SAME APPLIES TO OLDER STUDENTS.

MERROW: ARE YOU SAYING THE KIDS MAKE THE RULES?

TED SIZER: I THINK THE KIDS AND ADULTS TOGETHER HAVE TO MAKE THE RULES. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO ... HOW ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP DRUGS OUT OF THE SCHOOL UNLESS THERE'S A SIGNIFICANT PERCENT ... PERCENTAGE OF KIDS WHO SAY, WE DON'T DO THAT HERE.

MERROW: WELL BY GOLLY, WE'LL HAVE SOME DOGS THAT SNIFF OUT DRUGS AND WE'LL HAVE ENOUGH COPS.

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

TED SIZER: KIDS ARE A LOT SMARTER THAN DOGS.

M/N: HERE'S A SECRET EXCELLENT SCHOOLS HAVE KNOWN ALL ALONG: MAKE STUDENTS PART OF THE TEAM AND THEY'LL WANT TO JOIN THE GAME— NOT PLAY GAMES OF THEIR OWN.

ARNOLD PACKER: THE BEST PART OF IT IS IF YOU DO IT, THEY WILL LEARN WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW SO THEY CAN BE PRODUCTIVE CITIZENS. PEOPLE WANT TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION, AND IF YOU DON'T GIVE THEM AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION THEY'RE GOING TO BE PART OF THE PROBLEM.

M/N: WHEN ALL THE PIECES ARE IN PLACE— SAFETY, ACADEMIC QUALITY, THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, THE ADULTS IN CHARGE, A SENSE OF PURPOSE— THE RESULT IS EXCELLENCE AND YOU CAN SEE IT IN THE KID'S FACES.

LUYEN CHOU: THERE'S NO RULE THAT SAYS SCHOOLING SHOULD BE BORING THAT IT SHOULD BE UNINTERESTING THAT IT SHOULD BE THE ANTITHESIS OF FUN. THERE'S NO RULE THAT SAYS THAT. I DON'T KNOW WHY IT IS THAT SOMEHOW WE EXPECT THAT'S WHAT SCHOOLING IS ABOUT. YOU GO TO A GREAT SCHOOL YOU GO TO AN EXCELLENT SCHOOL AND YOU SEE THE SMILES ON KIDS FACES YOU SEE THE SENSE OF PASSION AND PURPOSE ON THEIR FACES AND YOU SEE THEIR GENUINE ENJOYMENT FOR WHAT THEY'RE DOING. AND YOU KNOW THAT SOMETHING IS HAPPENING THAT IS RIGHT THERE. AND THAT'S PROBABLY THE MOST POIGNANT INDICATION OF THE STATUS OF THAT SCHOOL IN THE SPECTRUM OF GOOD TO EXCELLENT.

SCENE 15 [WAREHOUSE]

THUG: THERE, THAT'S EVERYTHING I KNOW. AM I DONE?

MERROW: SURE, BUT DON'T LET ME CATCH YOU HANGING AROUND SCHOOLS EVER AGAIN. NOW SCRAM.

SCENE 16 [IN OFFICE]

WOMAN: I THINK THAT WRAPS IT UP THEN. I HOPE THIS COVERS YOUR SERVICES. (HANDS HIM AN ENVELOPE).

MERROW: YOU'RE MORE THAN GENEROUS.

WOMAN: I AM GLAD I HIRED YOU, MR. MERROW. NOW I FEEL BETTER

The Merrow Report
School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School

ABOUT CHOOSING AMONG SCHOOLS. YOU KNOW, IN A FUNNY WAY YOU REALLY DO NEED TO PLAY THE DETECTIVE TO FIND THE RIGHT SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD.

MERROW: WELL, I'VE ENJOYED WORKING THIS CASE TOO. SAY, I FEEL LIKE CELEBRATING. WHAT DO YOU SAY YOU AND I GO OUT TONIGHT. DINNER? A COUPLE OF DRINKS?

WOMAN: MAY I BE BLUNT, MR. MERROW?

MERROW: OF COURSE.

WOMAN: MEN ARE A LOT LIKE SCHOOLS. THERE'S BAD, GOOD ENOUGH, AND EXCELLENT, IF YOU GET MY DRIFT. GOODNIGHT, MR. MERROW.

[SHE LEAVES, DOOR CLOSES, FADE TO BLACK.]

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THIS PROGRAM PLEASE VISIT PBS ONLINE AT PBS.ORG

CREDITS