

WILLOW RUN
COMMUNITY
SCHOOLS

***Changing
Classes***

***School Reform and
the New Economy***

MARTIN PACKER

Changing Classes

School Reform and the New Economy

Martin Packer

Cambridge University Press

2001

What is at stake is our vision of the kinds of human beings we would hope Americans to be in the last years of the twentieth and the first years of the twenty-first centuries, and of the kinds of education that will help bring those human beings into existence.

Lawrence A. Cremin. *Popular education and its discontents*. Quoted in the report "Research and the Renewal of Education," from the National Academy of Education, 1991.

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chapter 3

Vehicles of Reform, Drivers of Change

March 92 - June 93

The 1983 document titled *A Nation at Risk* was the earliest of a series of reports blaming U.S. schools for the country's economic troubles. Famously, the authors of that report, commissioned by the Secretary of Education for President Reagan, T. H. Bell, fancied that "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." They suggested that what amounted to "an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament" has left the nation's schools lacking solid content to curriculum and with low expectations of student performance. Students spend less time in school than in other countries, and that time is used poorly. The profession of teaching pays badly, attracts less qualified people than it might, and trains them insufficiently in the subject matter they will teach.

Citing "a steady 15-year decline in industrial productivity," a situation in which "one great American industry after another falls to world competition," *A Nation at Risk* declared that "[t]he risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than Americans and have government subsidies for development and export," but more broadly that we are entering an information age, a global village, where the "new raw materials" are "knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence." To compete in world markets for industry and

commerce, the nation's educational system needs reform. We are in "a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever greater danger, and of ever-larger opportunities for those prepared to meet them." Traditional jobs shrink in number, replaced by work requiring more "sophistication and preparation." But beyond this economic concern, "the very fabric of our society" is at risk. A "common culture" must be fostered, the writers of the report insisted, and education plays a crucial role here.

Evidence for this diagnosis? The authors acknowledged that "the average citizen today is better educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago," but at the same time "the average graduate of our schools and colleges today is not as well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much smaller proportion of our population completed high school and college." This, they insisted, has a major negative impact. The problem is caused by "weakness of purpose, confusion of vision, underuse of talent, and lack of leadership." Needed is "life-long learning," the creation of a "learning society."¹

In 1988 George Bush—keen to be "the education President"—met with the 50 governors at an Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia—only the third such meeting to address a national issue in U.S. history. The National Governors Association had for several years been drawing up recommendations for improving public education, mainly by defining standards. In what was described as a "remarkable consensus"² about the state of public schooling and the need for a national strategy, the bipartisan task force—led by Bill Clinton, then Governor of Arkansas—announced six "National Education Goals" to guide school reform at all levels.

By the year 2000:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. All students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter... and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.
4. The Nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.
5. United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
6. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Progress of Education in the United States of America—1900 through 1994.
U.S. Department of Education.³

The Bush administration soon proposed “The AMERICA 2000 Excellence in Education Bill” with a variety of specific recommendations for reform of public schools. The proposed bill was essentially intended to bring the principles of a market economy to schooling, rewarding excellence and introducing freedom of choice—but Congress didn’t pass it.

Despite this set-back, Bush created the National Education Goals Panel, in July 1990. A bipartisan association of Governors, senior administration officials, and Congressional representatives, the Panel was to chart progress towards the National Goals. Citing a need for new standards for educational achievement, the Panel adopted a charter for a National Education Standards and Assessment Council (NESAC), with the mission to coordinate various standard-setting activities. Its goal was to have a system of voluntary academic standards in place by 1994-95. NESAC asked professional organizations to develop voluntary standards in their fields—mathematics, science, history, arts, civics, geography, and English—and the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to help them do it. Fear was expressed in some quarters that standardized national testing might lead to a standard national curriculum, but the panel insisted that national standards did not mean federal standards, that the federal government was not developing these standards, and that, anyway, states were free to adopt or reject them. The NESAC disbanded in 1992, its initial task completed.

At President Bush's specific request business leaders formed the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC), with the mission "to support the design and establishment of new high-performance learning environments that communities across the country can use to transform their schools for the next generation of American children." The NASDC was analogous to a Research-&-Development department in business or industry; its objective was to raise \$200 million to support "design teams," each of which would provide the blueprint for a "New American School."

Bush issued a call to arms: "For the sake of the future—of our children and the nation—we must transform America's schools." He

called on every community to become an “AMERICA 2000 community” by adopting the six Goals, developing a community-wide strategy to achieve them, designing a report card to measure success, and planning for and supporting a “New American School.” The central notion was that the best solutions for school reform would be local ones. The proposal met with much criticism from unions (opposed to school choice) and conservatives (who saw threats to local autonomy), but by the end of 1992, 48 States and 2,000 communities had signed up.

Michigan’s Governor John Engler is one of the eight members of the National Educational Goals Panel. Not surprisingly, he supports the Bush administration’s calls for school reform. When Engler took office in January, 1991, beating the two-term Democratic incumbent by just 17,000 votes, the state of Michigan had a \$1.8 billion budget deficit, unusually high property and business taxes, and unemployment above the national average since 1966. Engler is ambitious and energetic, the oldest of seven children raised on a beef cattle farm in Beal City, Michigan. President of his dormitory at Michigan State University, he helped his father run for state representative while majoring in agricultural economics. In 1970, two years later, aged 22, he won a seat himself in the Michigan House of Representatives by 162 votes. As governor, Engler immediately took steps to cut taxes and “improve the state’s business climate”—words interpreted by many to mean reducing union power—in part by reforming Michigan’s public schools.

The previous administration had drawn up a “blueprint for action” in the state’s schools, based on reports like *A Nation at Risk*, stressing improved equity and opportunity. Public Act 25, adopted in 1990, called

for “quality education reform” by providing financial incentives for school improvement plans, a yearly status report from each district, and the design of a core curriculum to serve as a “model” for all K-12 teaching. Unusually, this model core curriculum, the “Michigan K-12 Program Standards of Quality,” defined expectations of “student outcome” rather than listing courses or programs of study.

To that point, accreditation of Michigan’s public schools had been entirely voluntary and based on “input” criteria such as levels of staffing and other resources, the existence of required policies and procedures, and so on. PA 25 proposed new standards (though these were not immediately approved) that focused not on input but on a school’s ability to demonstrate improvement in student achievement and other student “outcome” data. Engler’s reforms started from there.

In his January 1993 State of the State address Engler focuses on his plans for creating a “new generation of jobs.” To ensure that industry will get the highly trained workers it needs he will “cut red tape” for business and industry in the state “and roll out the red carpet.” Engler has placed school reform high on his “Taxpayer’s Agenda.” Emphasizing that the state’s job growth is now “more than triple the national average,” Engler acknowledges he’s “also seen faces of despair.” “To succeed, Michigan needs both highly trained workers and an entrepreneurial climate that invites investment and rewards risk-taking, because one without the other is not enough.” He announces plans to reorganize and consolidate the state’s job training programs, combine the roles of the departments of Labor and Social Services, build partnerships with business, and cut

property taxes. And he will increase school spending, but “we must get more for our money.”

Our universities are helping Michigan move from the Industrial Age to the Information Age—a new era in which knowledge and the ability to transmit that knowledge quickly across cities, counties, countries and continents will determine economic prosperity and the quality of life for our people. Knowledge opens the door to success, and I want every Michigan citizen to have the key. No one should be left behind. Helping people through education is a vital part of my vision for a new generation of jobs.

Our children’s schools must be the very best. If our schools fail, the cost will be staggering—more crime, dependence, broken families and shattered dreams. My friends, we cannot tolerate the loss of even one child. That’s why, despite tight budgets, I have fought to increase school funding. Over the past two years, while overall state general fund spending remained constant, we have increased spending on public schools by 48 percent—\$352 million. This school year, Michigan taxpayers will spend more than \$9 billion to support the education of kids from kindergarten through high school—that’s more than \$5,300 per child; or to put it another way, more than \$130,000 per classroom.

I recognize there are those who says schools cannot get better without more money, and that current inequities in funding make it impossible to improve outcomes. I disagree. The facts simply do not support the argument. Clearly, there are inequities. And I will again, as I did last year and the year before, offer recommendations to reduce those inequities when I present my budget.

Regardless of our differences, we all agree on one thing: We must get more for our money. For all we spend, our schools must do better. I believe every parent has a right to know how their school is doing. To inform parents, I will initiate a Governor’s School Report Card. This

building-by-building report on all 3176 Michigan schools will detail performance and spending—allowing comparisons with schools across town and across the state.

Tonight, I also renew my commitment to expanding options and fostering excellence in our schools. I applaud President David Adamany and Wayne State University's College of Education for their effort to break the mold and establish Michigan's first charter public school in Detroit this September.

I also urge this Legislature to move swiftly to enact teacher tenure reforms to insure that good teachers move up and bad teachers move out, as well as the Michigan Education Warranty to insure that our schools stand behind their students the way our automakers stand behind their cars.

Governor Engler, State of the State Message, January 26, 1993.⁴

Several organizations within Washtenaw County have put out a similar call for what one of them describes as “crossing to the new economy.”⁵ Michigan Future, Inc.—a “non-profit, non-partisan citizens group” supported by contributors that include Chrysler and foundations such as Detroit Edison, Dow, Kellogg and Mott—has undertaken the strategic task of publicizing the need to “provide the new learning demanded by the new economy in our schools and adult training programs.”

Michigan schools did an excellent job of preparing us for the mostly unskilled, mass production factory and office jobs of the Old Economy. The classrooms we attended looked like Old Economy workplaces. We sat in industrial rows, moved to bells, and learned mainly by memorizing. We were trained to take orders.

But as we've seen, the emerging New Economy demands employees who can solve problems with fellow employees without being told what to do by a supervisor or foreman. It demands employees who can keep learning new skills and master sophisticated technologies. The new economy requires very different schools and ways of learning—schools where students learn by working together, and where teachers coach students instead of telling them what to do.

Michigan Future, Inc. *Crossing to the New Economy: A citizen vision for a prosperous Michigan and a strategy for getting there*. Michigan Future, Inc., 1992. p. 17.

In February, Michigan Future Inc. holds a Washtenaw County Area Town Meeting to discuss how local schools could help create a flexible local marketplace of customized goods and services, preparing a workforce that is more responsible and consequently is awarded a larger stake in companies' success.

But at this meeting the Superintendent of Washtenaw County Intermediate School District, Michael Emlaw, presents survey data that paint a very different picture of what Michigan employers look for in a worker. The data show that most employers value not academic skills but character and attitude: the absence of substance abuse, honesty and integrity, ability to follow directions, respect for others, and punctuality. The *bottom* five items are achievement in academic subjects such as math, social science, natural science, computer programming, and foreign languages.

There is a second national impetus to school reform. Early in 1990 the National Science Foundation launched its "Statewide Systemic Initiative"

program—the first time NSF had provided major funding for efforts to transform the states’ educational systems. The architects of “systemic reform” were Marshall Smith, then Dean of Stanford University’s School of Education, and Jennifer O’Day, then a Stanford graduate student.⁶ In 1988 Smith, at NSF’s request, wrote a position paper sketching a way to organize state-wide reform of math and science teaching. The concern he articulated was that new emphases on teaching children “higher order thinking skills”—solving complex problems and applying knowledge to novel situations—threaten to leave minority and poor children behind, because the schools serving these groups often lack the trained teachers and other resources for such teaching.⁷

Smith and O’Day were convinced that an “equality of educational opportunity” is “*necessary* for responsible citizenship in our diverse modern society.”⁸ An ability to grasp “differing perspectives and novel approaches”⁹ is needed in our modern democracy and complex world. Their concern was moral and political, not economic (they added, almost parenthetically, that economic improvement might occur too), and their focus was on equity. “Simple justice dictates that skills and knowledge deemed *necessary* for basic citizenship and economic opportunity be available to *all* future citizens.”¹⁰

They elaborated the view that get-tough, “top-down” school reform mandates of the early 1980s had not worked, and neither had more recent, scattered, “bottom-up,” site-based reforms. The crucial issue is how to “deliver” the new higher order knowledge and skills fairly, without regard to race, class, gender, or language, and to do so in a way that still allows diversity among local school districts in their choice of curriculum, instructional strategies, topics emphasized, and language of

instruction.¹¹ Systemic reform would seek to “align” all the components of public schooling—legislation, curriculum materials, teacher training and certification, inservice training, and student assessment—and provide direction through a “common content”—the Curriculum Frameworks many states have developed to define expectations for what children should know and be able to do at different grades. The focus would be math and science education, both K-12 and post-secondary.

To avoid the problems previous reform efforts ran into, such an approach should “marry” the “vision and guidance” of government policy to the U.S. tradition of local responsibility and control. Systemic reform would require only a loose coupling of national and local activities, with the state as the crucial intermediary. The state would act as “stimulant” for local reform, providing direction and vision through clear standards for what students should learn, ensuring that state policies coherently support local districts, and seeking to reform legislation to give teachers the resources and flexibility to get on with the job. Individual schools should remain free “to choose the instructional strategies, language of instruction, use of curriculum materials, and topics to be emphasized.”

Now NSF is awarding competitive grants to states with proposals for such systemic reform, up to \$10 million over 5 years. State projects must aim to broaden the impact, accelerate the pace, and increase the effectiveness of improvements in math and science education, though they can tackle this task whatever way they consider best. In October 1991, Michigan submitted a proposal requesting Statewide Systemic Initiative funding. The proposal promised a review of existing state, local and professional association policies, programs and activities to see how they are or could be better “aligned,” and a competitive grant program to

provide funding and technical assistance to several urban and extreme rural “target” school districts. These districts would be expected, with technical assistance and guidance from the state, to design local “Models of Effective Learning.” In addition, a “framework” would be created to re-design the education of new teachers in Michigan universities and colleges. Among the Project Steering Committee are a principal investigator from the Michigan Department of Education and three co-principal investigators, from the Detroit Public Schools, the Michigan Partnership for New Education, and General Motors.

Located in the Michigan Department of Education Bureau of Instructional Services, MSSSI operates within the Office of Quality School Programs. The goals of MSSSI are to communicate the Vision for high quality science and mathematics education; align curriculum, instruction, and assessment; review educational policies and programs for coherence; create, in selected school districts, models of effective learning; redesign teacher education and professional development; provide leadership for and empower stakeholders; and ensure accountability and continuous quality improvement.

Zoe Barley, Mark Jenness, Sharon Dodson, Rebecca Thomas. *MSSSI: Evaluation Report for Year 04, 1995-1996*. College of Education, Western Michigan University, April 1997.

The award of NSF funding for Michigan’s Statewide Systemic Initiative (MSSSI) is announced in October 1992. In spring 1993 MSSSI sends a first draft of the “Vision” that will guide its efforts to all public and private school principals and superintendents, as well as to business and community organizations, to initiate a discussion among these “stakeholders.” MSSSI’s Vision will be the “measuring stick” for reform; a final version will be written by the start of 1994. The draft suggests that

the emphasis of systemic reform has shifted, reaching Michigan, from educating citizens to preparing workers.

[S]uccess in today's global economy depends on scientific and technological strength which is built on the foundation of mathematics and science education. The Michigan educational system must accommodate the changing needs of our society in general and the workplace in particular. Our schools must graduate students who are mathematically and scientifically literate and motivated to pursue further education and careers in science, mathematics, engineering and technology. Our state and national economic growth and their place in world markets are determined, in part, by our ability to provide scientifically, mathematically and technologically literate workers and lifelong learners.

The Vision: New Directions in Mathematics and Science Education. Michigan Statewide Systemic Initiative, 1993, 5.

The educational system in the United States is highly decentralized. According to the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: 'The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States.' In accordance with this Amendment, the federal government has no authority to establish a national education system, nor do Federal agencies ordinarily prescribe policy or curriculum for local schools. Such decisions are made at the State or district level.

Progress of Education in the United States of America—1990 through 1994.
U.S. Department of Education.¹²

The 15,000 local school districts in the United States have traditionally exercised considerable autonomy. The system of public schooling in the U.S., unlike that of many nations, has been designed specifically to avoid centralized authority. Each school district has its local school board, and each district is typically funded mainly by local property taxes. This means that efforts at the state and national levels to change what and how schools teach are confronted with what can seem like inconsistencies, fragmentation and diffusion. In particular, any approach to reform that mandates a standard national curriculum flies in the face of long-standing and fundamental assumptions about the function and role of public schooling in this country.

But these assumptions have come under attack. Local property tax financing creates financial inequities, say many—and efforts are underway in several states to identify alternative approaches to school funding. Local control makes large-scale reforms overly difficult to implement, say others—and the independence of local school districts is challenged by efforts to merge them into larger units, or to permit children to attend schools outside the district they live in. To many people the notion of a “systemic” approach to educational reform is very appealing.

Willow Run today is a place where nearly 15,000 people live. It is not a city or an incorporated village. We have no Service Club or Chamber of Commerce; no Department of Parks and Recreation; no Local Unit of Government except the Township. As a result our schools perform many functions.

Handbook of General Information for Willow Run Teachers, 1951.

But the Willow Run Community Schools have already begun to change. Willow Run's schools have always played a central role sustaining the community in the face of the stresses of work at the plant, and the antipathy, even scorn, of the rest of Washtenaw County. Superintendent Dr Youssef Yomtoob—known affectionately to staff and students as “Dr Joe”—takes an active role as soon as the plant closing is announced. On Blue Monday the *Ann Arbor News* quotes on its front page his immediate reaction: “We were getting encouraging news, so we were feeling good about it. It's very bad, very, very bad.... I don't know what else we can do... just keep supporting our people.”¹³ Yomtoob describes the closing as devastating to the school system, the community and the surrounding area, tearing the social fabric and undermining school finances. A more sanguine “superintendent's message” appears in the Spring issue of the *Report Card*, the schools' community newsletter:

On Monday, February 24, 1992, our community was hit with the devastating news that General Motors was going to close the Willow Run CPC assembly plant....

Without question, this decision will have an impact on the Willow Run Community, Washtenaw county and the entire state of Michigan. We will lose good people to other communities, cities, and states. In no way do I want to minimize the negative effects. However, we must all now turn to the future and do everything we can to lessen the toll the plant closing will take....

There are two strong messages that have been sent by the plant closing. First, as a District and a community, we have to do everything in our power to present Willow Run

as a good place to live and to learn. The schools have to recommit themselves to providing education of the highest quality to entice young families to move into our community. Eastern Washtenaw County is still the best housing bargain available and we have to make sure that this fact is widely known. Second, there is a painful but important lesson for our kids. The opportunities that were available for their parents may not be available to them in the future. We have to instill in them a strong value and thirst for education, an education that will position them to take full advantage of the opportunities waiting for them in the 21st century. They must be fully prepared to respond in a rapidly changing world. Only with the help and guidance of their families and the schools will they achieve that goal.

Willow Run is a caring, concerned and strong community. Together we will weather this latest storm and I have faith that we have the power to emerge even stronger in the future.

Youssef Yomtoob. "Superintendent's Message." *Report Card, Willow Run Community Schools*, Spring 1992.

Superintendent Yomtoob, hired in 1988, is widely credited with boosting morale and improving the district's image. He pushed for refinancing the bond issued to rebuild Willow Run High School in 1985, and \$1.3 million of this money is for technology improvement—computer labs in all the schools, libraries turned into media centers, computers in the classroom. The middle school will get a new technology lab with robotics, a wind tunnel for testing model cars, and computer aided design

and machining. Willow Run High School will get a lab for computerized architectural design and urban planning. Multimedia production equipment will be added at all levels, and there will be a district-wide electronic media center. The final phases of the plan involve more networking, a satellite link for distance learning, more classroom computers and telephones in each classroom.

Yomtoob has been passing out little red bear stickers with the slogan “I Willow Run”—a small, playful gesture, but an important corrective to the negative image the community’s history has given it in the eyes of the rest of the county.

Some say image is everything.

For several years, Willow Run Community Schools suffered from a negative image due to financial difficulties, aging facilities, and its curriculum.

But changes instituted during the tenure of Superintendent Youssef Yomtoob have moved Willow Run in a different direction.

“When I came here (to Willow Run), we set three goals for ourselves. The goals were higher achievement, financial stability, and positive image,” Yomtoob said.

“And during those five years, that is where we have concentrated our efforts. In terms of reaching those goals we have come a long, long way,” Yomtoob said.

Willow Run's negative image posed a problem attracting families and encouraging growth in the community, Board of Education Trustee Clifford Smith said.

For the past five years, red bear stickers bearing "I Love Willow Run" have become Yomtoob's trademark. His style and openness is credited with some of the success of the school district.

Raymond McMillan. "Willow Run crafts new image." *Ypsilanti Press*, June 14, 1993, 1A, 4A.

In his office in the old Spencer School building, Yomtoob muses on his decision to come to Willow Run:

"I think it was love at first sight... I like challenges. All my life I've believed that there are certain parts of the population which are underdog for one reason or another, and it is up to all of us to work with them, and they should succeed. I did not come here in terms of charity, that I'm doing a favor. They did me a favor to hire me; I appreciate that. But I think I understand where they're coming from, and I know where we want to go. They have to have the same chance as anybody else, maybe more because they come from underprivileged homes which is a disadvantage for them when they get to school."¹⁴

Now Yomtoob must guide the district's response to the plant closing—the local manifestation of a much vaster economic transformation.

The reform efforts in the Willow Run Community Schools are guided not by large conceptions of public schooling as a system, or even by a sense of its failure to keep pace with economic change, but by the expert know-how of skilled practitioners with a keen understanding of the community and its children. As Mary Brandau describes it, the changes at Kettering began seven years ago when it was the school's turn to host the district's Ethnic Fair.

"It was *wonderful*; we had such a good time with it. It was so much fun, and it was a lot of learning, and so much community support and involvement." This was what sparked the staff's interest in changing what happens in the classroom, though they hadn't figured out explicitly what they wanted to do. "When we did it, we didn't have any idea, except we knew it made *us* excited about teaching, it was fun, it was fun for the kids."¹⁵

Mary chaired the arrangements. "It was a year-long look at cultures. Every classroom became a continent, and then took one country in that continent. We had graphs comparing countries all over the building, we had maps all over the building. We invited people from the different countries to come and speak to different classes, and kids ate with chopsticks, and they took their shoes off outside the classroom. We talked about how they do that in Japan, and how they clean their own buildings, and what schools look like in different countries. We had missionaries come in, and the kids were really fascinated with different languages. Fifth graders assumed that if you came over on an airplane then you knew how to speak English. And I thought, oh my goodness, where did you get that? 'Well, they're here, they should speak English.' It was fascinating; I can still remember thinking, if you don't let kids talk, you have no idea what their misconceptions are."

Excited by the sense that there was a way of teaching that both they and the children found fun, the Kettering staff started working as a team on innovations like integrating instruction across the curriculum. For example, “We talked a lot about doing math. We would find out how money was done in another country, and how you would do conversions. Teachers got into it, it was a lot of fun.” Kettering developed a five year plan with the goal “to maintain high standards while integrating subject areas and increasing hands-on, minds-on activities.” Vivian Lyte was Kettering’s principal then, and that helped. Her attitude, Mary recalls, “was, ‘If you need something I will get it for you. You figure out what you need to do to teach, and I’ll get you what you need.’ Instead of this feeling, ‘I have to own what I have, because if I don’t protect what I own, if I let my resources out of my sight, then I will be deprived.’ I have to keep that up,” Mary reminds herself, “‘cause it’s real true.”

Many of Kettering’s children belong to families over the edge of poverty, struggling and stressed. The students here are amongst the poorest in the district. Some are children of single parents who moved into subsidized apartments near Kettering; others have young parents just starting out, working long hours in jobs that don’t pay much, working overtime whenever they can, without the time or patience to give their children much attention. Some come from broken homes. I hear of grandparents raising several sets of grandchildren in tiny apartments, some sleeping on the living room couch, and of women who got pregnant very young and are still living with their own parents, lacking job skills, lacking the schooling to help their children study. Each day, some children come to Kettering hungry, tired, lonely, scared, even angry. Many are hungry for adult attention, with little experience of reading or being read to, expecting to fail. Teachers speak of a child who pooped in

his pants because he'd been sexually abused and who couldn't work sitting down, instead perching on the table's edge. One little boy I speak to when he drops by Mrs Brandau's office tells me casually that his father and the fathers of both his step-brother and step-sister are all in jail, and his mother is considering leaving the area before any of them is released. Mary believes her school is one of the few places some children experience that is clean and hygienic, where people smell good.

At the same time, people in this community take care of one another. Vivian recalls her arrival at Kettering as a new principal.

"I was real nervous about being over there, [but] the parents would do anything for me. I remember the first time I needed something; something I needed for an assembly, and this parent was standing there—you know how you talk to yourself out loud?—'Oh gosh, I forgot something.' She says, 'I'll go get it,' and she took off and got it! She went and bought it, and that is how they were. That is sort of how the community is. 'You need that? Okay, I'll go and get it.' It doesn't matter whether I have the money, whether it is my last dime, but you need that and if you don't have it, I will go and get it. I guess that is what I mean about the connectiveness; that is what I'm talking about—the Willow Run story; and it goes way back. Even when there was a separate black and white community, they were separate and they argued and fought with each other, but when they came together it was, 'We are a community. We are Willow Run.'"

So when Mary talks of making learning fun, of engaging children in a way that was missing before, and of involving parents, she's speaking of the particular needs, attitudes and strengths of the children of this community. And these needs and attitudes stem from the fundamental

organization of working class life under fordism. At the same time, the strengths of Willow Run arose from the circumstances of the community's birth at the hands of Ford's company.

The division of labor in fordist production—mental labor; manual labor—has shaped the lives and life-styles, the tastes and attitudes, of the two social classes of capitalist society, including the different attitudes the working class and middle class have to work, to knowledge, and to schooling. Fordism required an “indirect, cognitive and symbolic relation”¹⁶ on the part of white-collar workers—managers, accountants, engineers, designers—but of blue-collar workers it demanded obedience, punctuality, a strong body and tolerance of monotony. Working-class culture consequently adopts a skeptical attitude towards theoretical knowledge and book learning. Paul Willis noted among manual workers in the English midlands “a massive feeling on the shopfloor, and in the working class generally, that practice is more important than theory.... The shopfloor abounds with apocryphal stories about the idiocy of purely theoretical knowledge. Practical ability always comes first and is a *condition* of other kinds of knowledge. Whereas in middle class culture knowledge and qualifications are seen as a way of shifting upwards the whole mode of practical alternatives open to an individual, in working class eyes theory is riveted to particular productive practices. If it cannot earn its keep there, it is to be rejected.”¹⁷ Willis adds that “The working class view would be the rational one were it not located in class society” where theory has taken on a social guise that makes it the hollow currency of social advancement and cuts its close ties to material reality. For the middle class, theoretical knowledge confers choice and mobility. For the working class it has no such utility.

The economic circumstances of the classes reinforce these differences. Along with its division of labor, fordist production, like earlier versions of capitalism, entailed the exploitation of members of the working class: the profit squeezed from the products of their labor flows to the owners of plant and equipment, not to the workers. The middle class consequently enjoys a “distance from necessity,” an “indirect” relation to the world, that the working class does not experience. The former can cultivate detachment, indifference, and a separation of form from function, while the working class find themselves pressured to adopt a pragmatic, functional, and matter-of-fact attitude to their circumstances.¹⁸

Kettering’s students are the fruit of this life-style, born into a culture that values manual labor and practical reasoning. Consequently the hands-on student-centered pedagogy catches their attention. Traditional schooling—sitting silently at a desk, filling out worksheets—might keep such kids in line, but at the cost of losing their allegiance. This is schooling more attuned to where the children are coming from, and where they could—should?—be going.

A parent, a tractor-trailer mechanic in Detroit who left the Willow Run schools in 1982, tells me what school was like then. “School was alright, you just had to go there. All you had to do was be there, and you’d pass. You didn’t have to do nothing. I was a hard-headed kid, thought I knew everything. I had classes that I went to and I never did nothing. I never lifted a pencil off the table and passed with a D. Well, I just wanted to get out of school.” He laughs. Of his son, in fourth grade, he says, “I’d like to see him go to college and not have to go to work and do manual labor like I do. You know, I’d like to see him wear a suit and tie to work.” His wife adds, “Not have to come home all dirty.”

One morning in third grade illustrates children’s attitudes towards traditional academic tasks. Their teacher has just assigned seatwork from

the math textbook dealing with “fact families.” The task is to work on problems like $7 + \underline{\quad} = 14$ with multiple choice answers.

As the children start to work (or at least as the teacher finishes her explanation of the task and hands over responsibility to them) I pull my chair up to a group of four girls and ask them what they were doing. Tabatha says she doesn't know. She hates math. She flops back in her seat. I say maybe we can figure how to solve the problem, even if she doesn't know the answer right now. She looks bored and uninspired. Lesley says they had four pages of math for homework just the previous evening. She pulls her work out of her desk to show me. She goes through the first problem for me, but she solves it by drawing on the fact that $7 + 5 = 12$, $12 + 2 = 14$, $5 + 2 = 7$, so the “added” is 7. This approach isn't going to help Tabatha, whose eyes are still glazed. “Did you find out how to do it?” she asks me. “Yes,” I say, “hold on,” because Jessica is leaning over from the far side of the table to tell me that she has done all the homework and she is going to get all this work done quickly too. Goody-two-shoes, I think, but ask her if she can tell me how she solved the problems. She pulls her paper back towards her chest. “I do my own work,” she says scornfully.

At that point the teacher interrupts to make an announcement, and Tabatha takes advantage of this to engage me in small talk. “There's pizza for lunch,” she says with a smile of anticipation. “Really,” I reply politely. Then a little touch of inspiration hits me. “How much pizza do you eat,” I ask. “Just one.” “What if you ate five pizzas?” I say. She grins; “That would be five dollars!” “What if you ate seven pizzas,” I persist. “That would be seven dollars!” “What if you ate seven more pizzas?” She pauses to think, then: “Fourteen dollars.” “Fourteen dollars,” I repeat. “You just solved the first problem: seven plus seven is fourteen.” Her eyes widen and she starts to smile.

Mary explains that Kettering's first efforts were a good beginning but they want to go further. "There was no 'essential question,' and no level of higher-order thinking. Our problem is, we can do *that* kind of stuff. *Now* the test is, are we still pushing the kids to the higher levels of thinking? Not 'This is the flag of the country and draw the flag of the country,' but, the next time we do it, what is the level of learning going to be?"

The Kettering teachers spend much of the 1992-93 school year testing out the next step. With the guidance of Prof. Shirley Magnusson from the University of Michigan, teachers in 3rd through 5th grades work to coordinate their instruction, collaborating on "project-driven inquiry." Students design and assemble a variety of scale-model buildings—a mall, houses, a zoo, Kettering School itself—and wire them with batteries-&-bulbs lighting. The children are given opportunities to work in small groups, and find they have to learn to cooperate, respect differences, and organize their activity. Children sometimes become angry with one another, and some of the buildings get trashed several times over in frustration. But they are rebuilt, and some children build houses at home, without the teachers' assistance, while others discover the concept of π as they measure the circumference of the school's pillars and try to figure out the radius for their scale model.

Parents become involved, too, and those I speak with are pleased with what is happening at the school. Some of them come to cut foam-core board in the art room, when the knives are too sharp for the children to use safely. Cyd Karr, the district's roving art teacher, describes how parents come in to help their children work in the artroom and end up playing with the paints themselves. Cyd has to tell them, "No you don't,

this is your daughter's painting." Janice Brown, principal for the year following Vivian's promotion, calls it "Copping a paint." And Hazel Stangis talks of the parent trying to help her child make measurements, who says, "The kids know more about measuring than I do!" "But we didn't scare her away!" says Hazel. "And she still helped the child..." she adds in a tone of wonder.

And in what is called "process writing" the children articulate what they have learned about electricity, going through as many as six or seven drafts—an interdisciplinary use of language arts skills to discuss and describe electricity, a scientific concept. Much of the composition uses the new computers for word-processing. This kind of writing calls for a good deal of intense individual attention from a teacher, working on spelling, sentence structure, paragraph development and so on. The children draft, type, then they read to each other ("What are you saying?"), then more editing before the final draft is ready. Their reports include reactions to how they've worked together—some now refuse to sit together, others have developed close relations with their peers.

For the staff this project is not all plain sailing. It really tests their commitment, and they hit difficulties and contradictions. Constructing the buildings takes far more time and effort than anticipated, "running ahead" of them. Concern develops over "ownership" of the project—much of the students' creative work happens in the Art class, and some teachers feel Cyd has the best job.

At one staff meeting Mary admits, "I was very disappointed in their report writing, some of the students aren't making any sense. 'I learned how to diffuse a battery....' It's a lot of conversation and sometimes they're getting it; they know their actions, they know what

they have done, but they don't know how to take what they have done and have it make any sense. They know they built the building, they know they put the wires and batteries and light bulbs together, but they really don't understand, some of them, 'circuit' or those keywords. They can't answer the questions." The Kettering staff begin to talk about how to make the connection between discovery learning and more direct instruction. "How much direct teaching is it going to take, to be more of a coach, for the kids? I dance, but I know that I don't do it by trial and error. I can't learn that way. So maybe we need to learn more about how kids learn. It concerned me—all this work, all this energy, and kids not answering these questions."

Traditional classrooms foster an annunciatory conception of truth, where the child falls in with the opinions of the teacher, and validity is based on conformism with authority.¹⁹ The Kettering staff, along with others in Willow Run, want to escape from this model of learning. But what is the alternative? The larger calls for school reform are often linked with proposals for "constructivist" pedagogy, like that in 1989 from the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM),²⁰ which called for teaching for understanding rather than memorization, fostering application of knowledge to new settings through discovery and hands-on investigation. Such proposals have met with a host of criticism because they are seen as replacing instruction with appeal to children's intuitions. This is "fuzzy math," the critics say. After all, they point out, mathematics is not natural, it is a highly complex acquired skill. Children won't spontaneously re-discover mathematical and scientific concepts on their own. Critics have demanded a return to the traditional model where the teacher instructs children in "correct" reasoning.²¹

NCTM has probably been misinterpreted; the intention was not to suggest teachers leave the classroom altogether, but once direct instruction is relinquished, finding the right balance is tricky. Student-centered reform seeks to lead children to an understanding that knowledge is a human product, constructed, always fallible and incomplete. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) explains: "It is appropriate in science, as elsewhere, to turn to knowledgeable sources of information and opinion, usually people who specialize in relevant disciplines. But esteemed authorities have been wrong many times in the history of science. In the long run, no scientist, however famous or highly placed, is empowered to decide for other scientists what is true, for none are believed by other scientists to have special access to the truth."²² The AAAS recommends that even in kindergarten, children should be asking and investigating their own questions, and that before they graduate high school they should design and conduct a major investigation in which they "frame the question, design the approach, estimate the time and costs involved, calibrate the instruments, conduct trial runs, write a report, and finally, respond to criticism."²³ In such an approach, comprehension is emphasized, rather than coverage of academic content.

But these new math and science Standards and Frameworks make only broad and general suggestions about *how* to teach, leaving teachers to figure out most of the details. The NCTM *New Standards* make minimal suggestions about pedagogy beyond "actively involving students individually and in groups in exploring, conjecturing, analyzing, and applying mathematics in both a mathematical and a real-world context... Being a facilitator of learning."²⁴ The *Michigan Essential Goals and Objectives for Science Education* clearly states its aim to "provide suggestions about

what to teach, but *not* how to teach or how to assess student learning."²⁵ And nowhere is there discussion of children's different attitudes. Teachers and administrators like those at Kettering must learn how to make this new pedagogy work.

And so, Mary insists, the main issue is, "what are *we* learning from this? What are we learning about how we coordinate and integrate instruction, and what are we going to do to prevent this in the future, so that *you're* not saddened, and *your* class isn't out for a part of it. I'm saddened personally because I miss it, but *they're* not saddened because they've got the greatest over there. What they're learning is wonderful."

The Kettering teachers are searching for ways to satisfy their students' needs for attention and support, for food and rest, and they are finding ways to work with, rather than against, the children's skepticism about book learning and negative expectations of schooling. I come to see this search as an important experiment—an attempt to make schooling relevant to working-class children; one that amounts to an effort to change the kind of person these children can become, to counter the costs and consequences of fordist capitalism. But it remains to be seen how this vision of the future, in which local children acquire a "thirst for education" and Willow Run is appreciated as "a good place to live and learn," will mesh with the Governor's vision of a freshly-trained and flexible workforce that will entice new industry to Michigan.

In recent years, the Willow Run schools have undergone a rebirth. The pride in the schools is increasing; parents are becoming more involved, and community support for the schools and the programs is increasing. That is not to say that Willow Run does not face issues. It has the same problems as other schools. While it is solid right now, finances are tight; there is concern about the achievement levels of the students; there is need for more parent participation. But overall, there is no doubt that

Willow Run's fortunes are rising, and the current board deserves a share of the credit for that.

Editorial. "Willow Run." *Ypsilanti Press*, June 7, 1993, 6A.

An open house is held at the end of the year. The local press, the superintendent, and members of the school board are here, along with all the students and their parents, and the mood is one of celebration and shared accomplishment. In the gymnasium are arranged the scale models of the school, the mall with its Sears, the working-class bungalows, ranch style houses, and elaborately architected houses Cyd helped design. "Oh, I wouldn't mind living in one of those myself," Cyd says, and I find myself echoing her. Custom designs, cathedral ceilings, skylights—each angled differently to the road, with orange paper driveways to a car porch. The bungalows sit more modestly, squarely facing the road, with no off-street parking.

The parents here appreciate the project; to them it makes sense that their kids have made something concrete. Mr Maylone is an auto engineer with two kids in 2nd grade, another in middle school and a fourth at college studying engineering. "He's following in your footsteps," I say. He hesitates, as though considering that I might be mocking him, then says, "Well, I think he'll do better than me."

Progress is not simply change in a valued, an envisioned, direction, it is change that can be sustained. The Willow Run teachers must find ways not only to transform their classrooms, but to sustain these changes, as the ground shifts under them and they face a variety of obstacles. Janice speaks of "the whole group dynamics and problem solving and

confrontational issues” among staff, as well as “the acceptance or rejection or struggle with project-based science.”

There is a variety of teaching skills and personal styles in the building. An approach like project-driven inquiry appeals more to teachers who see students as engaged learners, who try to get their students involved, and don’t necessarily follow the textbook. Other teachers follow the book more closely, and struggle with an inquiry approach.

Mary observes, “Unfortunately—and I mean very unfortunately, because we have learned so much from each other this year—teachers are really used to working in isolation. And old tricks die hard. It was very clear to me that once we got our heads together we collectively knew a lot more about electricity than any single individual did.”

Janice tells me, “Another example is the schedules, and bells, and all of the false, system, bureaucratic kinds of things that we create, which have nothing to do with children. They’re for our own organizational purposes, and I see a lot of conflicts with that.”

“How easy is that to change?” I ask.

“*Oh, Martin*, it’s the hardest thing in the world to change. You have the parents who believe in a certain tradition of schooling. You have the administration that tells you to go ahead until you go too far. Then you have the teachers that *must* have, and should have, certain rights protected. You have all of those things. And then you have a single administrator that, no matter how good he or she is, cannot manage two hundred and fifty children at one time. That’s the reality of it.”

The Kettering staff appreciate the need to be sensitive to parents' views of schooling. Many parents are proud of Kettering; they tell me the school is "closely knit." "If you could get a view from the top, you'd see a big light here. The school is the hub, playing a vital part in the community. And kids are the biggest vehicle of change." But Janice Brown explains to me, "This is a working-class community—working-class or non-job, that type of community. And there's reason for the people in this community to be suspicious of the educators.

"Some of them have gone through this system and not been successful, and they base their experiences on their own successes, so we have to prove to them that that kind of thing is not gonna happen with their child. *Many* of the parents have been in and said they have seen great improvements, so I *know* that we're working hard to improve things. But, also, their aspirations for their children may be that they just go to high school and get a job, and our aspirations, professionally, may be much greater than that. So we have to make sure we're always in tune, and sensitive to aspirations and so on."

As a child Vivian Lyte worked in her father's grocery store, and he tried to keep her away from the cash register, for fear she wouldn't learn how to count if she used the machine. She feels parents in Willow Run resisted the introduction of calculators into the classroom for the same reason. Vivian tells this story to illustrate how the parents need educating too. Their attitude to kids is that they'll be doing wrong unless they are prevented. And you can best change parents by drawing them into the decision-making process in the schools. Every school is supposed to have a group with parents as members; not so many that they form a majority. And these representatives will talk to other parents in the community so word gets around.

Some parents may share the educators' aspirations for their children but disagree on the means being employed. The notion of kids "teaching themselves" may be going too far. Janice explains, "We do a lot with our parents here, so they're getting a more intuitive view about what education should be about. The traditional view of course is that education is based on facts and figures, one correct answer, textbook approach, and so on, and we've spent a lot of time with our parents saying, 'That is a tool, but it is not the product.' It is *not* the product. And we've given them examples of the kinds of things that are different."

Janice adds, "In fact I know a high school principal that literally lost his job—he got it back again, but he lost his job because he worked in a working-class community. When he started there about twelve percent of the students went to college and now 70-some percent do. And he didn't do a very good job of preparing his community for that."

"What was their objection?"

"Well, they knew the children would grow up and leave the community then."

"So you're getting a sense that there are some boundaries that you may not want to cross?"

"Well there's some boundaries I will cross, and then we'll see what happens. I say that, but there's never been a time here when I haven't felt the support of the community. I have a tremendous community. I don't know how far they want to go though. We'll just see. And maybe, maybe I'm going too far; I don't know."

[T]he changes since 1987 have come so fast as to seem almost magical: distributed data processing, interactive telecommunications, computer-integrated manufacturing and control systems, shared-database marketing alliances, supplier and customer networking, real-time order entry and control systems, robotization, customization, disaggregation, globalization. Increasingly, the mindless work of our civil society is accomplished by mindless things: machines and software. In short, there is hardly a job left in our own society that does not require a talent for integration....

In this world, employees... will need the very qualities of mind advocated by democratic pamphleteers long ago. These include the capacity for grace under pressure, creative poise, abstract thinking, technical problem solving, cogent speech, and conflict resolution....

“What is ‘best’ for companies is also, more and more, ‘right’ for people. Not that businesses have suddenly become citizens. But for the first time in the history of industrial capitalism, the interests of businesses are consistent with those of citizens, consistent with the yearning for intellectual cultivation, self-direction, uniqueness, and zest in work....

[And this] requires us to think about business’s obligation to support the reshaping of public education.

Bernard Avishai. “What is business’s social contract?” *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 1994, p. 44-46.

Is it really conceivable that “for the first time in the history of industrial capitalism, the interests of businesses are consistent with those of citizens”? The relationship between GM and Ypsilanti Township hardly demonstrates such shared interests. Perhaps it was the last straw in a bleak time, perhaps GM finally went too far, perhaps it is the symbolism of Willow Run’s plant—the local community is going to fight. In early March, 1992, the Ypsilanti Township Board of Trustees takes an unprecedented step, voting, with UAW local support, to claim breach of contract against GM and try to force the company to keep the Willow Run plant open. When the company received \$250 million in tax abatements in 1984 and 1989, saving it about \$14 million, GM said jobs would be kept at the plant. Now Township attorney Doug Winters says, “It’s time to find out what a community’s rights are.... They make the same promises everywhere. They should have some kind of corporate conscience, not to make promises they’re not going to keep. It’s binding on us for 12 years. It should be binding on them for 12 years.”²⁶

A trial for Ypsilanti Township’s suit against GM is scheduled for next January. Governor Engler is trying to stay out of the suit, appealing an order from County Court Judge Donald Shelton that the state take a position—the attorney general’s office tells the Court of Appeals that doing so would damage the state’s relationship with local governments and businesses.

The government released a report Monday showing that the percentage of full-time workers who earn less than \$12,195 annually grew sharply in the past decade, a period of economic expansion that brought new prosperity to the affluent....

The report was finished months ago but delayed while Census officials fought over how much attention to draw to it. New York Times and Associated Press. "More fall into low-wage jobs: Number grows despite boom." *Ann Arbor News*, May 12, 1992, 1A.

This is a Presidential Election year, and here too a sharp clash between the interests of workers and those of business is evident. Blue Monday was the day after the Democratic primary in Maine, and the race is being described as topsy-turvy, a lively free-for-all. Paul Tsongas and Gerry Brown tied with just under 30 percent of the votes each, 16 percent of voters remain uncommitted, and Bill Clinton—considered the front-runner just a month ago—received only 15 percent of the vote.²⁷ When the candidates for the Democratic Party nomination reach Michigan they find an angry electorate. A Willow Run worker is quoted in the *New York Times*: "The politicians say, 'I'll do this, I'll do that.' Yeah, right. Then they get elected and do nothing. If I had my way, I'd throw out every politician. I would." Another worker yells "The system don't work," then stomps off.

Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, popular with Midwestern blue-collar workers, withdraws from the race in March, leaving many wondering where to turn next. National union leaders decide not to endorse any of the remaining candidates for the present.²⁸ Clinton and Tsongas are seen as candidates of business and the rich—both support free trade with Mexico, and Tsongas has opposed legislation to prevent companies hiring replacement workers during a strike. Gerry Brown has taken to wearing a UAW jacket and makes Michigan a major focus of his campaign.

Political activity in and around the Willow Run plant greatly increases in the months before the election. The union local had endorsed Tom Harkin, then Gerry Brown, and finally Clinton, and voter registration is high, motivated by a desire “to make sure George hits the unemployment line before I do.”²⁹ Pundits declare Michigan a swing state vital to George Bush’s re-election prospects, but Bush is detested here, even though “Reagan Democrats” in Michigan supported him four years ago, when he won the state with 53.6 percent of the vote, and although the Bush campaign is being helped by strong Republican organizational support from Governor Engler.³⁰ “Bush has lied to us for so long,” says one auto worker. “I’ll never vote for him again. God, nobody’s got a job. You practically trip on the homeless.” The *Detroit News* explains: “Most workers expressed anger and disgust, particularly at President George Bush. They figure he played a part in steering work to his home state of Texas because it will play into NAFTA—the North American Free Trade Agreement now being negotiated, which would remove tariffs and other barriers to the movement of goods, services and investments among Canada, the U.S., and Mexico—and because Texas offers a lot more electoral college votes than Michigan.”³¹ A Washtenaw County commissioner is reported saying, “This is hardball politics on a national level.” Some workers have taken to wearing buttons that read, “George Bush: the best president that Japan ever had.” Clinton is increasing his attacks on Bush, saying at a speech in Detroit that Reagan and Bush have “driven the American dream into the dirt for millions of Americans. This country is an open wound tonight.”³²

Labor Secretary Lynn Martin conceded that the North American Free Trade Agreement could put up to 150,000 Americans out of work, while Democrats asserted that the President’s plan to help them was inadequate.

Keith Bradsher. "Democrats Call Plan for Help Insufficient. Trade Pact Could Cost Up to 150,000 U.S. Jobs." *New York Times*, September 11, 1992, C1.

Josh, a sixth-grader at Edmonson Middle School and a student of American karate, has recently become interested in union activities. After the Willow Run announcement, he accompanied his parents to a UAW-backed rally at Willow Run High School that featured Jesse Jackson. He also has spent some time picketing local Kroger supermarkets in support of striking workers there. 'I'm worried that [there] won't be any more unions in America in the future,' he says.

Owen Eshenroder. "Waiting in a shadow: Sleep's not easy as couple ponders life beyond Willow Run." *Ann Arbor News*, May 11, 1992, C1, C4.

But voters across Michigan are "turned off and didn't turn out" in the primaries, as the *Press* puts it. In Ypsilanti Township only 5000 people go to the polls—18 percent of registered voters, equal to the percentage state-wide. Clinton and Bush win their respective primaries at both the state and local level; Clinton is now considered to have virtually clinched his nomination as Democratic candidate.³³

When Bush's presidential campaign comes to Michigan in October, Bush tries to argue that higher gas mileage requirements Clinton has proposed will eliminate autoindustry jobs, but UAW officials counter that they will stimulate new technologies and create jobs. The economy is starting to show some slight signs of recovery—a survey of executives shows 47 percent are optimistic, and retail sales are up slightly³⁴—but this is too little and too late to help Bush. National opinion polls show 78

percent of people judge the economy “fairly bad” or “very bad,” and 80 percent disapprove of the way Bush is handling the situation. Bush’s approval rating has eroded rapidly as he continues to insist that things aren’t as bad as they look, and tries to shift the election debate to social issues and “family values.” Throughout the Midwest, the economy and jobs are the issues that voters are concerned about. When Clinton wins the presidency, in November 1992, Bush’s loss is attributed to the hard economic statistics, but also to a palpable and pervasive “sense of economic foreboding, a fear that the United States [is] losing its manufacturing base and economic leadership to Germany and Japan.”³⁵

Several new economic reports demonstrate starkly the extent to which Americans’ incomes have stalled, painting a depressing picture of workers struggling to crawl up a down escalator.

Steven Greenhouse. “Income Data Show Years Of Erosion For U.S. Workers. A Decline In Expectations: Democrats See an Opportunity to Stress Voters’ Perception of Flaws in the Economy.” *New York Times*, September 7, 1992, A1.

Suddenly, Robert Stempel resigns as chairman and chief executive of GM, apparently forced out by the board of directors, a week after collapsing at a meeting and being hospitalized for high blood pressure. When the *New York Times* publishes the sixth in its series of articles on the closing of Willow Run, it focuses on the news about Stempel: “Just when the workers thought things couldn’t get worse, they did.”³⁶ The board apparently feels that GM is not changing quickly enough, that Stempel, a 34-year veteran, an engineer who made it to the top, a “car guy” who workers feel knows the industry in a way the “finance people” do not, is too steeped in the old GM culture. A dollar of GM stock bought ten years

ago has earned only 10 cents profit, compared to \$2.42 profit from Chrysler and \$3.66 from Ford.

The UAW issues a statement calling Stempel a “victim” of “White House policies that have relentlessly tightened a noose around our nation’s domestic auto producers.” Others say that Stempel should have better understood GM’s problems.³⁷ One worker says, “The first thing I did was just laugh. I thought, ‘Well, he’s expendable too. He’s finding out how it feels.’”³⁸

GM’s current president—John F. (“Jack”) Smith Jr.—is named new chief executive, and the board says they’ll give him six months to turn the company around. Smith, who has been highly successful cutting costs in GM’s international operations, speaks in New York of the need for help from the UAW, and talks of a “common ground” of understanding emerging between GM and the union. He says he will announce four more plant closings by the end of the year, and he predicts GM will return to profitability by next year. White-collar jobs will have been reduced to 79,000 by the end of 1992 from 91,000 at the start of the year, with a goal of 60,000, while hourly jobs will have been cut to 288,000 from 304,000.

In December, confidential GM papers unsealed in the Washtenaw County Circuit Court suggest that union relations did indeed play a key part in the decision to close Willow Run. They show that consolidating production at Arlington will save \$197.9 million each year, but consolidating at Willow Run would have saved \$271.7 million. It would have been cheaper to upgrade the Willow Run plant than the Arlington plant, and will cost more to close it. In addition, worker absenteeism was lower at Willow Run. But Arlington was apparently judged by GM to have “progressive union-management relations,” including a UAW local

that is more flexible on job classification, files fewer grievances, and has settled contracts before deadline. Local 276 at Arlington has “been more receptive to taking more innovative approaches to bargaining” and “more flexible” about GM shipping work to outside contractors.³⁹ An unnamed GM administrator says Arlington offered a union contract with streamlined terms that would significantly reduce labor costs, allowing GM to run the plant 24 hours a day.

Regional UAW Director Bob King says “It’s what we’ve said all along. They lied to the local union. They lied to township and county officials. They lied to state legislators. I hope Michigan’s congressmen and senators take this up with them. They owe Ypsilanti workers a new product. With GM in such bad financial shape, it’s crazy to make the decision on anything except finances.”⁴⁰ Doug Winters, Ypsilanti Township attorney, says “When this plant has a lower unit cost and GM says it will have trouble securing a work force down there, it tells you they’ve got their eye on the border. They’re not getting out of the car business, they’re getting out of the state and busting the union.”⁴¹

February, 1993 brings unexpected and exhilarating news. After a nine day trial, Judge Shelton rules in Washtenaw County Circuit Court that GM may not close the Willow Run plant! “The local governments of this state are placed in a position where they have no choice but to give taxpayers’ resources away under a statement that does not mandate that they receive anything in return,” Shelton reads from his judgment. “There would be a gross inequity and patent unfairness if General Motors... is allowed to simply decide that it will desert 4,500 workers and their families because it thinks it can make these same cars a little cheaper somewhere else.... My

conscience will not allow this injustice to happen.” He is interrupted by loud applause. GM has “lulled the people of the Ypsilanti area into giving up millions of tax dollars which they so desperately need to educate their children and provide basic governmental services.” He issues a “promissory estoppel,” which provides compensation for a broken promise or *quid pro quo*. “GM is hereby enjoined from transferring the production of its Caprice Sedan and Buick Integ...” He is interrupted again by applause and cheers from overjoyed workers in the courtroom.

The judge rejects Ypsilanti Township’s claim that the tax breaks accepted by General Motors amounted to a contract, but he does accept that the company had promised continual employment at the Willow Run plant until 2003.⁴² Jerry Clifton says, “It brings tears to your eyes. It looks like America again.” A plant worker says, “Throughout the Reagan era, big business got their way. Now maybe it’s time for the working man to get his way.”⁴³ But a GM lawyer calls the judge’s ruling “ridiculous,” and says the company will appeal.

The *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* covers this development. In an interview, Township Supervisor Prater calls the tax abatements a “nice form of blackmail: the company is essentially saying if we don’t get the abatement we’ll leave your community.” He says, “we had two choices—either to be a willing victim, or an unwilling victim. The moment that Judge Shelton said ‘I hereby enjoin General Motors,’ it was a surprise, it was a very pleasant surprise but, you know, we had achieved our goal, what we wanted to do.” But the *News Hour* report notes that an auto industry analyst describes the attitude of company decision-makers to “a township that will take a company to court when the company is trying to survive” as “extraordinarily negative.” GM could become embittered, feeling kicked when it is down. It could even respond by closing the

Hydra-matic plant. *News Hour* reporter Fred de Sam Lazaro notes, “GM seems determined to fight for what it sees as its right to make and act on business decisions. GM has already served layoff notices.”

Prater replies: “Well we’re not really trying to tell them how they conduct their commerce.... It *is* very competitive out there, but it’s not like they haven’t been made aware in advance that we can’t continue to export *all* of the jobs out of this country and expect us to be healthy as a society. These companies such as General Motors, Ford, they’re all profit-driven, and at some point in time I think the *social* responsibility as well as profit has got to come into bearing.”