

When he started at Manual as a freshman, he'd been preoccupied with working as a drug runner for the Southside Sureños, a gang that he had joined three years earlier, at the age of eleven. Barely into his first semester, he left school to serve a sentence in the nearby juvenile jail; the police had found sixteen hundred dollars' worth of cocaine in his car. "Keep it true to the blue" was the Southside position on snitching, and he had done so. But the associates whom he had protected did not visit him when he was imprisoned, and when he got out he had refused to rejoin them. This meant that back at Manual, after months of incarceration, he had neither money nor friends. And while he excelled at the math required for dealing cocaine—"how you divide and price the ounce, given your profit-over-cost calculations"—he was behind in all his other subjects. "And you know the most depressing thing?" he said. "I didn't sell drugs for survival, like some of my relatives had to, back in the day. I just sold drugs for PlayStation."

There is a Mexican saying about making mistakes young, *El que más temprano se moja, más tiempo tiene para secarse*: The earlier one gets wet, the more time to dry. Norberto thought that making mistakes young just gave a boy more years to live with the consequences. His eyes betrayed this dark self-assessment, in those instances when he lifted his head. One day, Julissa pulled up a chair.

He had registered her presence already. Julissa and her sisters had a quality that he wanted to emulate. Though they walked daily into the same street foolishness he did, they had a way of backing off that made the confrontation, not the confronted, look small. His male classmates would have laughed to learn that he studied the street sense of underweight females, but he took life instruction where he found it. "In jail, I wondered what a friend is, and what it means to trust," he said one day, quietly, watching Julissa and one of her sisters across the table at lunch. "But maybe it's just, when you tell the story of yourself, you don't have to leave things out."

Julissa's own story involved a disabled mother, an absent father, overcrowded public housing, and transient motels. But she believed that self-pity was morally lame. "So a really bad life is, like, when your dad teaches you to cook up the crack before he teaches you to read," she told Norberto. "Otherwise, have an issue, grab a tissue, suck it up." She categorized her classmates as "Wants to go up" or "Doesn't care," and pushed Norberto to be one of the former. Some weeks, his parents asked him to skip school to do drywall, in order to meet a car

payment or the six-hundred-dollar monthly rent. Other times, he said, "I missed school because I'd missed school, and didn't see how I would catch up." When Julissa didn't spot him in homeroom, though, she'd call: You make this place less boring—get up and come. Her sisters would work on him, too, until by the start of junior year Norberto was the one making morning calls to ambivalent scholars. "Not like I rose up high out of the ashes," he said. "Just a little more further from the ground."

Now, though, all of Denver seemed to know that the Manual classes that Norberto had struggled to pass were laughably easy, and he felt a little foolish. "I think Bennet makes our school look bad to make himself look good," he said. "Though when he says we should go to college, maybe that really is for our betterness. But what if I'm not smart enough anymore, to get that far?" There was something a teacher said in the days of protest: The world needed followers, too.

Julissa didn't have the same academic anxieties. A student-government leader who was second in her class and whose mother made sure that she stayed there, she was confident even in Honors World Literature, which she called "my college-hard course." Although the books that the teacher assigned were set in crazy places, she made connections with ease, and the lesson of the failed Manual protest seemed similar to something that she'd recently written in an essay on "Things Fall Apart," by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe: "Getting beat down help in the future because it breaks you to do whats right instead of fallowing the crowd."

The average high-school student today is weaker academically than the average high-school student of 1950. This phenomenon is often ascribed to declining standards and the degradation of culture, but democratization has been a factor, too. We now expect public high schools to offer academics—the foundation of college work—to more, and more kinds of, children. In the past twenty years, the number of high-school students who say that they expect to finish college has doubled, to more than seventy-five per cent, with the largest gains shown by the urban poor. On the other hand, the increase in the number of students who actually finish college is less than ten per cent.

When George W. Bush promoted his No Child Left Behind plan in the 2000 Presidential campaign, he said that he wanted to realize more of those aspirations, by subverting "the soft bigotry of low expectations." The formulation had a pleasing moral simplicity, and, in the



years since, the repudiation of low academic standards for low-income and minority children has become dogma for both the left and the right. However, the average tenure of a superintendent in a large, high-poverty district is twenty-eight months, a statistic that suggests the practical and political difficulty of actually raising standards and then helping children to meet them.

Last May, in Michael Bennet's eleventh month on the job, he grasped more of its contradictions: for instance, that one way to avoid charges of racism was to continue to neglect bad schools for minority children. But he had been conditioned to see salutary effects in a great, public-spirited challenge. In his childhood home and at his high school—St. Albans, a private boys' school in Washington, D.C.—ideas about privilege and obligation were typically linked. His grandfather had been an economic adviser in Franklin Roosevelt's Administration. His father ran the U.S. Agency for International Development under Jimmy Carter before assuming the presidency of National Public Radio and, later, of Wesleyan University. Such a lineage exposed a boy to certain possibilities, and Michael had done well by them. Now, applying himself to children who had self-perpetuating birthrights of their own, he was undaunted by the fact that more experienced superintendents had failed at reforms less ambitious than his. "Well, one of these days someone's going to pull it off," Bennet said to me last spring. "Besides, I really don't see how you can hold both propositions to be true: that these urban public schools aren't fixable and that the America of a decade or two from now is going to be a place where any of us would want to live."

One Sunday morning shortly after the Manual protest movement sputtered, he took this relative optimism to a Presbyterian church in a neighborhood called Park Hill, where the houses are large and gabled and the tree canopy—oaks, buckeyes—stands at a healthy fifteen per cent. Thirty-five years earlier, Park Hill's white residents had moved to keep minority children out of the community's public schools, leading to the first Supreme Court case to recognize the right of Latinos to a desegregated education. The 1973 case, *Keyes v. School District No. 1*, had helped change the character of Park Hill as well as civil-rights law, and the neighborhood was now one of the most progressive and civic-minded in Denver. The Denver public schools, though, were like most urban school districts across the country: as segregated as they were in the nineteen-sixties.

Standing before a packed room of congregants and citizens, Bennet looked slouchy and boyish, the shirt-

tails of his oxford escaping his trousers as he bounced on his feet. "Think about it," he said. "What other public institution would we let sink to this level? If the Mayor says, 'I'm going to pave one hundred and fifty alleys,' then comes back the next year and says, 'Well, I spent all the money and only got to two, I'll get to it next year,' we'd go crazy. But when we spend three quarters of a million dollars in a school ostensibly teaching a subject, and only two kids in that school learn anything, we think that's normal. And I think that's because we've allowed ourselves to confuse the system's lack of quality with the kind of kids who are in our district."

In his prep-school days, Bennet had been a fair actor, in roles ranging from wood sprite to God. He has a low, gravelly voice that carries without volume and gives a deadpan, cheerful air to his admonitions. His listeners, having been reproved for their indifference to the disadvantaged, generally come to feel that they've been puzzling out a rescue plan with him—unlike other shirkers in the room. As Bennet turned to the intricacies of his reform agenda, people began to nod approvingly.

"Class size matters, and the kind of breakfast a kid gets matters, too. But the studies make clear that good schools are, first and last, about the quality of the teaching," he said. No Child Left Behind does virtually nothing to inspire talented people to join the profession, and Bennet didn't have the funds to raise salaries significantly, owing to rising pension costs and declining enrollment in the district. Still, he wanted Denver to be known as a place where the craft of teaching was taken seriously and a sense of philanthropic mission embraced. His chief academic adviser and pedagogy coach, Jaime Aquino, had been a seminarian, counselling lepers in the Dominican Republic, after which he taught and ran bilingual programs in the New York City schools. Already, Denver voters had approved a twenty-five-million-dollar tax increase that allowed Bennet and Aquino to expand a model program that paid teachers for improving achievement and taking assignments in high-poverty schools. (The most experienced and credentialed teachers have always clustered where they add the least value: in public schools with affluent student bodies.) Now the two men would train their teachers and principals in strategies that were showing measurable results in impoverished settings elsewhere in the country: for instance, asking middle-school students who were below grade level in reading or math to forfeit electives for a double dose of that subject. They would reduce the time that teachers spent on matters unrelated to student achievement, and