

provide more and better data about how individual students were progressing throughout the year. (Only after the school year is over do state tests tell a teacher which students have failed to learn.) Though urban schools are typically better at measuring what eight-year-olds do than what teachers and administrators do, Bennet promised accountability on both sides.

"I want us to be a leader in this country at a time when, more than anything else, the American public needs to see an urban school district succeed," Bennet said in conclusion. "So what I'm asking you for now is to refuse pessimism about our kids, to hold me accountable, to keep this conversation about student achievement going, to sign up—got to slip a plug in here—to be a mentor for one of the Manual students." He stopped, shrugged, and opened his palms. It took him half an hour to detach himself from listeners who wanted to enlist in his cause.

We got into Bennet's six-year-old Saab, then sped past City Park, with its zoo, formal gardens, and lakes, and entered less congenial territory. He wanted to show me around Manual High. I had known Bennet slightly fifteen years earlier, through his brother, James, a friend who is now the editor of *The Atlantic*. Michael was then clerking for a federal judge, and positioning himself for a prime appointment in the U.S. Department of Justice as the Clinton Administration began. He struck me at the time as someone to whom old-fashioned words like "clubbable" and "well met" would apply, but he wasn't particularly happy. He was only a few years out of law school, and the predictability of his prospects already chafed. Before long, he fell in love with an environmental attorney named Susan Daggett, whose relish of the legal practice clarified his suspicion that he was in the wrong profession. They married, and when she was offered a good job with a nonprofit organization in Denver he gave up the East Coast and the law with some relief.

A bit at a loss about what to do in Denver, Bennet had applied for a job in the investment company of Philip Anschutz, a political conservative whose business in oil, railroads, and telecommunications had made him one of the country's wealthiest men. Bennet's liberal friends were dubious, and Anschutz's people were, too. Anschutz recalled, "While he'd held a string of prestigious jobs, there was internal controversy about hiring him, since he lacked a business background and some of the necessary practical skills. But I was impressed with his presence—the quiet, understated

intelligence, the quality of being both well read and open-minded." Anschutz offered him an entry-level, sixty-five-thousand-dollar-a-year position on the condition that he attend, at his own expense, evening classes in accounting and finance. Three years later, Bennet was a managing director of the company, at work consolidating failed movie-theatre chains into the largest theatre chain in the world. ("You'll never hear me say I want to run the schools like a business," Bennet liked to tell Denver's teachers. "I made my living off of bankrupt ones.") He was in his late thirties, with two young daughters, and more money than he knew what to do with, since his most expensive avocation, sailing, was difficult to pursue in the Rockies. In 2003, when Hickenlooper was elected mayor, Bennet gave up several million dollars in unvested shares to become Hickenlooper's chief of staff.

Hickenlooper had also forsaken millions of dollars to work for the city. He became a popular mayor, able to generate support, in a historically libertarian milieu, for government schemes to protect the environment and house the homeless. Bennet, meanwhile, earned a reputation as the hidden mayor. "Half the time, he didn't want me to know what was going on," Hickenlooper told me, laughing. The two friends act like brothers, with the rivalrous impulses that this implies, but they generally agreed about the schools. Despite Denver's economic revitalization, the willingness of the teachers' union to take risks, and the passage of a three-hundred-million-dollar bond for school improvement, the schools weren't getting better fast enough. Hickenlooper thought that the district needed Bennet's implementation skills and tenacity.

Bennet is not by nature introspective. "The examined life is not worth living," he sometimes says, and as he drove us toward Manual he claimed not to have lost a minute's sleep over the decision to close it. "I'd like to get to a place where it's not the superintendent saying, 'You need a better school than this'; it's the community expecting and asking for that," he said. "But, until good schools are demand-driven, you need a proxy for the demand. Voting rights weren't demanded for a long time, either, and I don't think the analogy to the civil-rights movement is far-fetched at all."

But, if closing Manual High was the right decision, the protests helped Bennet realize that he had been imperious in the process of making it—neglecting to keep parents and students informed as he considered and reconsidered his ideas. Many in the community now regarded him as a liar as well as a racist, and were



skeptical of a compensatory promise he had made: to redesign and reopen Manual as a model high school, beginning with ninth graders in 2007 and adding a grade each subsequent year.

The idea of gradually reopening Manual troubled the part of his mind that made cost-benefit calculations. Shrinking enrollments in the district had generated more than a million square feet of surplus classroom space, and little practical need for the school. But after the popular backlash, he found himself soliciting residents' advice about the sort of programs they'd like to see at a new and improved Manual High. The next time Bennet moved to close a troubled school—and he had a wish list—he thought that he would demonstrate more patience. He indicated this intention while caroming around corners, liberally interpreting stop signs, sipping coffee, encapsulating the academic history and test scores of every school he passed, admiring images on his periphery—three straight-backed Mexican women with red parasols promenading down a razed city block, like a *barrio Seurat*—and chatting on the phone with his wife, who was home with their daughters. Only when he pulled into the Manual parking lot did his timing seem off. He banged into a parking barricade, sending notebooks and budget reports flying.

He had expected the school to be empty on a Sunday. Entering the lobby, however, he was surprised to hear cymbals crashing and women's voices rising in the darkened auditorium. He peered in and saw a hundred hat brims: wide ones wrapped in cotton batting or festooned with plastic roses; skinny ones with dotted-swiss veils. A neighborhood church was borrowing the space for its services, and within seconds the preacher's voice thundered over his choir: "My eyes fool me not! Here is Michael Bennet, the *overseer* of all these school changes."

Bennet was trapped. The preacher summoned him to a makeshift pulpit on the stage, and the parishioners, mostly black, surged forward. Their hisses were soft, this being church.

To some of Bennet's aides, the rancor in the community seemed incoherent: the man was trying, after all, to help their children. But over the last ten years the parents and grandparents in the auditorium had seen reform plans come and go: no-fail policies, parent contracts, pay-for-performance incentives, critical friends' groups, inquiry-based learning programs, something called Advancement Via Individual Determination, and the Gates small-school model. Bennet's proposal seemed part of the usual cycle: reformist passion, disappointing gains, dereliction.

Standing among the elders, who were swaying in satiny robes, Bennet looked a good deal more wood sprite than God. He began by apologizing for his unpolished shoes. Then he apologized for his absence of neckwear, for his lack of prepared remarks, and for rushing the Manual decision. After that, he hung his head for a moment, as if he didn't know what to say next. In the weeks since his critics had called him a racist, Bennet had taken to quoting Martin Luther King, so I was braced for a bit of mellifluous, marginally relevant oration. Instead, Bennet's flight of ingratiation ended. "Last year, on the tenth-grade math test, only thirty-three African-Americans in the entire district passed," he resumed flatly. The swaying stopped. "Thirty-three—in the entire city and county of Denver, Colorado. And only sixty-one Latinos. This is a fight."

For Julissa Torrez and her sisters, school was the easy part. The rest of their childhoods had been marked by so many untimely deaths and violent incidents that they thought their family was the object of a hex—one beyond the scope of the Mexican grandmothers in the neighborhood, whose white magic involved feathers, bathtubs, and eggs. One day after school, Julissa knelt on the floor of her living room, sighed over a recent poem—"After murder, everything feels absurder"—and picked up the Manual yearbook. She studied the photographs intently, and, after a while, took a pen topped with a pink marabou feather and put a small "x" beside some of the names. Nicanor, Angélica, Samantha: "What I hear, they're dropping out."

The living room was appointed with plastic ferns and paintings of Jesus; on the sofa, her sister Zerina, Manual's impending valedictorian, wept. Earlier in the week, she'd given birth to a daughter. Julissa's mother had been born with half an arm, and she sat nearby, expertly balancing the newborn on the stump while using her hand to make phone calls: first to see about replacing the Medicaid card that had been in her purse, which had just been stolen, and then to her eldest daughter, Dominique, who was at the hospital awaiting tests regarding a precancerous condition in "the girl parts." At the calls' conclusion, Julissa's seven-year-old half brother, Isaiah—the product of her mother's relationship with a drug addict who was subsequently imprisoned—removed a Pop-Ice from his mouth and cried for attention. But at that moment a pregnant neighbor appeared at the screen door, also in tears. Prenatal tests, she informed everyone, suggested that her child would be born disabled. The attendant hugs and offerings