

of Pop-Ices were interrupted by an official from the housing authority, who stopped her car in front of the house and yelled at the family for not watering the lawn.

Julissa remained transfixed by the yearbook on her knees. Candido, Desiree, another Desiree, Vincente, Ebony, Kia, James, Sigourney, Mya, Crystal, Eljio, Mercedes, leasha. "Some kids were going to quit anyway—their families need them to work and all," she said. "But, for a lot of people, Manual is home, and it's like now we're being taken away and put in foster care, where maybe we won't be wanted. You'll be showing up, having to start over, in a place where everyone thinks you're dumb. And, besides, what if you choose a school and Bennet closes that one, too? They say he's going to be closing all the minority schools, eventually." She turned a page. "This girl says she's going to South High, but honestly? I don't think she's going to make it." Julissa lost her train of thought then, the pink-feathered pen hovering over a photograph of Norberto. Lately, it occurred to her, he'd been keeping his eyes to himself.

Manual lacked air-conditioning, and by the first week in May the climate inside the school was better suited to growing papayas than to learning, although neither activity was being attempted. One morning, in a room with a poster of Einstein over the door, an inspirational speaker dispensed advice to Manual's graduating seniors: "A grateful attitude will take you a long way!" Meanwhile, other imminent graduates were hauling garbage to two Dumpsters that sat next to the bleachers. "Our teacher decided that cleaning up could be our final exam," one boy explained.

A student's right to trade a bad school for a better one is a cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act. The Manual closing simply forced the issue for an entire student body. There were twelve traditional public high schools in Denver, and while Bennet considered only three to be in good shape, most had strong academic offerings and higher test scores than Manual. To the students, though, test scores and course offerings were not dispositive. Most chose their new school based on whether a friend or a cousin was already enrolled, and able to offer a fig leaf of social protection. Julissa decided to follow a favorite guidance counsellor, Mr. Durgin, to South, a large and racially diverse school five miles away, which offered courses ranging from Japanese to Advanced Placement music theory.

One Tuesday morning in May, South guidance counsellors arrived at Manual to help Julissa and the other incoming students choose their classes for the fall. Bennet

had planned the day in the hope of generating some excitement about the next academic year, and the South counsellors seemed capable of carrying out his directive. Led by a silver-haired woman with a voice made for bedtime stories, they met with Julissa and the other students one by one, asking about their hopes for the future (careers in massage therapy figured large); analyzing transcripts for glimmers of academic strength; and gently advocating college-prep coursework for students who asked questions like "European history—so what's that about?" and "Is geology the thing with the maps?"

"I think you're ready for more of a challenge," they insisted to student after student, a few of whom stiffened and shrugged. But, leaving the room, Julissa and most of her classmates felt pleased in their choice of classes, and of school. "Lady was banging," concluded a boy who had shaved notches in his eyebrows, to indicate the gang he belonged to. "And South ain't no ghetto school, either." The counsellors, however, looked aghast. A hundred and sixty-eight Manual students were scheduled to attend South that fall. A hundred and five of them hadn't shown up.

Down the hall, counsellors from other high schools were meeting their incoming students, though not all the welcomes were warm. An influx of terrible students can quickly turn a school that has been making decent progress by the standards of No Child Left Behind into a failing institution.

Norberto had chosen North High, five miles from home, because it was where the cheerful retired major who ran his J.R.O.T.C. program was being transferred. He didn't know that Bennet was hinting he might close North, too, barring swift, dramatic improvement that Norberto and the other incoming Manualites were unlikely to spur. The North counsellors examined no transcripts and asked few questions about goals, and, when a special-ed student wandered in bouncing a basketball, an irritated counsellor shooed him out and shut the classroom door. The door automatically locked, and soon other aspiring North students were milling in the hallway, unable to get in. This lockout ran counter to Bennet's hopes, but it seemed to fulfill the students' expectations. As a rule, strangers weren't eager to meet them.

Three days earlier, their prom had taken place in a suburban hotel whose gift shop sold Roloids and Liberty Bell paperweights stamped "Denver." The conference room where they danced was bleak—the decorating committee had funds for only twenty balloons—so excitement built at the discovery, down a hallway by the check-in counter, of a fountain in a grotto of plastic

rhododendrons. This display was intended as a backdrop for wedding and *quinceañera* photographs, and the teen-agers headed over to pose. However, their orange stilettos, blue Mohawks, snake-head canes, and trilbies with two-foot-long feathers startled the tourists arriving at check-in, and the manager had a word with a Manual principal. The students left the grotto just as those locked out of the classroom now shrugged and headed for the exits: coolly, as if this outcome had been their choice.

The Denver Public Schools headquarters is a gray hulk on Grant Street, downtown, in the geographic limbo between the Governor's Mansion and the titanium rhomboids of the Denver Art Museum. The central feature of the superintendent's office, on the top floor, is a shiny conference table; on it, during a meeting shortly after registration day, lay piles of spreadsheets and the increasingly weary head of Michael Bennet.

Despite the controversy, Bennet had, by the end of his first school year, built up a fan base of sorts. Principals, initially skeptical of his reforms, now seemed enthusiastic, and Comcast, Whole Foods, Crate and Barrel, and the city's business elite had helped raise five million dollars—a record amount—toward their implementation. The *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* were following his progress closely and intelligently, and Bill Clinton would soon show up at one of Bennet's training workshops for principals, to cheer them on. The plan to rescue the Manual students, on the other hand, was a bust. "Wait," Bennet told his aides when he lifted his head from the table. "Can you just tell me what the biggest problem is?" A senior adviser, Brad Jupp, replied, "The answer to that is that every problem sucks."

The rescue plan depended heavily on mentors, of whom Bennet had recruited nearly two hundred and fifty in two months with the help of local nonprofit organizations. Mostly white professionals, and many experienced in mentoring, they were prepared to follow their assigned children until the end of 2006, when the students would theoretically be settled in their new schools. But suspicion ran so deep among the students that half of them refused the offer. And the children who did accept mentors barely saw them, because the schools forbade private meetings until the adults had gone through lengthy criminal-background checks. In the interim, more students dropped out of the program, and even ice-cream socials weren't luring them back.

On Grant Street, Bennet had surrounded himself with some brilliant, determined people, among them Brad Jupp, who had helped design the model program to pay teachers for increasing achievement and, in an earlier incarnation as a middle-school teacher, persuaded inner-city adolescents to share his love of Ezra Pound. Jupp feared that Bennet's increasing obsession with Manual was consuming a disproportionate amount of time. There were five or six other troubled high schools in the district; an entire middle-school program in need of reform; and overcrowded elementary-school classrooms whose amelioration would cost millions of dollars that the district didn't have. The teachers upon whom everything depended were overwhelmed by new curricula and grading standards, and considered Bennet's proposal for a salary increase—two per cent—disrespectful. Meanwhile, Bennet's top aides were rushing to pick up the soda for the next gathering of mentors and students at Manual, or hastily assembling a college fair in the gym, or trying to find out why one Manual principal had sent students to a course in rope climbing when they should have been registering for next year's classes.

"But these are the last weeks before we lose these kids for the summer," Bennet told Jupp, his voice unusually plaintive. He rose from the conference table, phoned another top administrator, and sent him off to Manual, too. There were five hundred and fifty-eight students now left at Manual, and many citizens saw the fate of those children as emblematic of the broader reform, and of the sincerity of his commitment to minority kids.

After a semester of being yelled at by Julissa and her peers, Bennet had begun to see them more clearly, and to see as well that, in his ardor to save them, he had managed to add to their troubles. He'd been asking them to be optimistic about their futures, and about their intellectual capabilities—capabilities no longer abstract to him—while simultaneously broadcasting the evidence that their education had thus far been a farce. As Norberto put it, "Manual gave me my pride back, then Bennet took the pride away."

In the past, when Bennet had been faced with a complex problem, his charm had helped him solve it. But, to the Manual students, that quality—they called it slickness—was simply a part of his privilege. They knew that he was a millionaire and had gone to a fancy private high school—more, they contended in anger, than the man would ever know about them.

In a neighborhood whose stores were fronted with orange banners—"Glass Pipes for Sale!!"—the odds were