

As you read this engaging, well-written case, try to reflect upon such questions as:

How did the new superintendent devise his reorganization strategy? What were its basic assumptions? Who were Bennet's chief allies sponsoring these reforms?

What major roadblocks did his approach quickly encounter? Where did the opposition come from? Why were those whom Bennet's plan aimed to help most some of his most vocal enemies?

Why had Bennet been blind to several of the main difficulties that he came to encounter as he implemented this educational reorganization plan? Was his apparent blindness due to his own personal background, his lack of classroom experience, his limited understanding of the students attending Manual, the speed at which he wanted to introduce change, the prior history of repeated failure attempts at school reform, or what?

How did he adapt his reorganization strategy to the growing opposition? Was his strategic switch a success, from your perspective? Why or why not?

Did this local case study involving public school reform fit or fail to fit Paul Light's central thesis? If so, why? If not, why not?

Reflect on the title of this story, "Expectations" and think about its importance in regard to effective reorganizations anywhere. What factor does "expectations" or individual and group desires, hopes, aims, and goals play in making organizational change happen for the better or worse—or for the better *and* worse?

Expectations

KATHERINE BOO

Like most juniors at Manual High School, in the impoverished northeast quarter of Denver, Colorado, Norberto Felix-Cruz was Mexican, multiply pierced, and laden with chains. Although he was quiet by nature, he clanked when he walked. On his way to school from the small house he shared with many relatives, he sometimes passed a park with brown grass and a curious sign: "Tis not birth nor wealth nor state, but get up and get which makes any man great." Norberto wasn't expecting greatness, however, and he often arrived late. His departures were just as unhurried. Manual's peacock-blue hallways were peaceful, owing to the presence of armed police officers, and he found them a good place to linger.

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As classes let out one afternoon last spring, he was crouched in front of a metal bookcase in Manual's basement, smoothing and stowing the fat triangle of a folded American flag. This was his duty as battalion commander of the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, one of the few elective courses available at Manual, and the only one with negative social status. When the previous commander was discharged—she was pregnant and had started to show—the post had not been hotly contested. Still, Norberto was grateful to J.R.O.T.C. for his appointment, because it had prompted his mother to brag about him for the first time since he shamed his family by picking up a drug charge, freshman year. He was grateful, too, he said, because "J.R.O.T.C. really stands for free food—Country Buffet after Color Guard, all you can eat, and shrimps and wings and chimichangas." Thanks to these subsidized meals, he

had progressed since freshman year from scrawny to nearly imposing, an impression that he enhanced with black work boots, a pencil-line goatee, glittery earrings, and a tendency to walk with his chin down and eyes half-lidded. It was a stride of wary resolve, Norberto hoped, and he adopted it as he made his way from the J.R.O.T.C. office, past the cops, and out to the aluminum bleachers by the track, where some of his classmates were taking the sun.

"You got the brains of a stripper," a sophomore boy was saying to a plump, ponytailed girl (another beneficiary of J.R.O.T.C. food) who was dating an older guy whom nobody liked. Seeing Norberto, the boy changed the subject: "Hey, Norberto, you know how people get the teardrop tattoo on their cheek the first time they kill someone? My friend—I'm serious—he put the *name* of the guy on his face!"

Norberto worked construction most afternoons, with his father, who had brought his family up from Durango ten years earlier. They had a drywall job to finish by the evening. Now, though, Norberto sat and stretched his legs. The bleachers offered a view of the Rockies, forty miles west, and, against them, the towers and cranes of downtown Denver. But his focus soon drifted to the plank on which he sat, which had been freshly tagged with gang graffiti. Studying the elaborate red scrawl, he said to his friends, "The person who did this tag didn't know how to spell the name Chici." The Chici 30s, a local gang, were in ascendance at Manual now that members of their rival gang, the Oldies, had dropped out. "See," he said, "they think the word 'Chici' begins with a 'Q.'" "So what's the right way to spell it?" someone asked.

It was quiet then, until the girl with the ponytail protested, "Norberto, stop looking to me like that, like you're some teacher!"

"Well, I don't care to know," another boy said. "I don't like those dudes, remember?"

"No wonder the whole city thinks we're stupid," Norberto said, addressing a recent turn of events that some on the bleachers still refused to accept. "Like, that's our education in a nutshell—we can't even spell our own gangs right."

Last year, Manual High was one of the worst schools in Colorado. Nine out of ten students failed the state writing test; ninety-seven of a hundred failed the math test; one in five freshmen graduated. This wretched showing belied the fact that, for a decade, Manual High had been the object of aggressive and thoughtful reforms. The most recent was a million-dollar intervention by the

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, begun in 2001, which turned each of Manual's three floors into an intimate mini-school, with its own principal. In these environments, some students had a sense, for the first time, that their teachers knew and cared for them. But in many classrooms the mutual affection came at the expense of academic rigor. Discipline was weak, gang ties intensified, and in five years a student body of eleven hundred shrank by nearly half. The academic performance of the vestigial students—"the dregs," as one counsellor put it—barely changed.

Manual's imperviousness to reform was an extreme example of a national commonplace: after a quarter century of concerted attempts to improve urban school districts, the results for poor children, beyond some gains at the elementary level, remain slight. Predictably, the troubles at Manual registered only faintly in Denver's wealthier precincts, where private schooling is the norm and community advocacy revolves around environmental issues like carbon emissions and the tree canopy. The school, which was situated at the terminus of the city's light-rail line, was considered, if at all, with nostalgia. Founded more than a century ago and named for the kind of labor it prepared students to do—brick-laying, printing—it had produced some of the city's leading black politicians. In recent years, though, the neighborhoods from which Manual derived its students had gone from black to brown, as Mexicans arrived to take service jobs in the prospering city center. Whites would dominate the neighborhood next, students predicted; there was already a fair-trade coffee shop. But for now the commercial offerings on the boulevards included cheap vodka, kidney dialysis, and a juvenile jail. Outsiders didn't often swing by. Thus, as 2006 began, the teen-agers were stunned to discover that they had become symbols of academic failure citywide.

The cause of this unflattering attention was a new superintendent named Michael Bennet, one of a loose cadre of former business, military, and government leaders, all education novices, who have taken control of some of the largest, most troubled school systems in the country. Joel Klein, New York City's schools chancellor (and a former Assistant Attorney General of the United States), may be the best known of the group; Bennet is, at forty-two, one of the youngest. A former editor-in-chief of the *Yale Law Journal* who had become bored by the legal profession, he spent his thirties making a small fortune as a corporate-turnaround artist. Then his thoughts shifted to public service. In 2003, when a friend, John Hickenlooper, was elected mayor of