

Transforming Children's Lives

*In March, 1998, Pioneer Institute sponsored a forum featuring internationally-recognized educator **Dr. Lorraine Monroe**. Dr. Monroe's career reflects a lifetime commitment to excellence, even in the most difficult and inhospitable conditions. As a New York City teacher and principal, and as a consultant to school systems around the world, she has shown that caring educators can transform the lives of disadvantaged at-risk children. Known for her work as founding principal of Central Harlem's Frederick Douglass Academy, one of New York's most outstanding and highest achieving public schools, Dr. Monroe has proven that toughness coupled with compassion can lead to extraordinary results. She has emerged as a model of effective leadership, a lesson in how to save children, schools, and communities against all odds. Her leadership strategies are outlined in her recently published book, *Nothing's Impossible: Leadership Lessons from Inside and Outside the Classroom*. The Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center at Pioneer Institute has contracted with Dr. Monroe to share her wisdom and experience with Massachusetts charter schools through the School Leadership Academy, a program that teaches strategies for innovation and excellence to principals and school administrators. In the following pages, Pioneer Institute has reproduced an edited transcript of the forum.*

I am a public educator of more than thirty years, both in "good" schools with "good" kids and "good" traditions, and also in schools where people thought that nothing positive could happen because of the children's complexion, economic backgrounds, or first language. My personal life indicates that if you go to a great school where people do not take excuses, where people teach you, and not who your folks are; teach you, and not what your complexion is; teach you, not how much education your parents have; teach you, and not where you live, good things can happen. All of us here are concerned with making good things happen in education, as we should be. It is crucial to the well being of our country. There is widespread concern about what to do for the children who are considered the least in society, who are under-served by most public schools across this country. What is distressing is that we already know what good schools look like. We already know what to do to provide quality education. It is just that we have chosen which children we will do it for.

When I visit schools, I am always asked, "Dr. Monroe, do you want to see our gifted and talented children?" I say, "No, I want to see all the children." They say, "But we have a gifted and talented program." So, I always see the gifted and talented children, who are generally white. Or they are the "valued-added children," as I heard someone say recently. The black and brown children in the gifted and talented program were referred to as value-added children. That was chilling. Then there are the special education programs, which in most places, are like the roach motel: you check in, but you never check out. The students in these programs are generally and pervasively black and brown boys, often immigrants out of Central and South America. These are the under-served. They represent the dominant and enduring crisis in this country that we must address: what do we do with the poor, the disadvantaged, and the newcomers to this country who come to the schools? There must be some kind of change for that growing population. The quality education that we already know how to provide has to be for everybody. As Ron Edmonds said, "We already know (what to do), but do we have the will to do it for these children?"

We are on the right track with choice and charter schools. Charter schools aim to give children who are traditionally under-served the quality education that we already know how to produce. With charter schools, we have a grand opportunity to create schools of excellence, with a cross-section of children from the community who choose to go there. Charter schools give the teachers who worked in traditional schools, the ones who complained about the unresponsive administrators, the uncaring colleagues, the hugeness of the school, and the anonymity of the teachers and children, a chance to control their own destinies. These teachers are the ones who say, "If we could be loosened from the burden of education; if we could choose the people we work with; if we could throw out the crummy principal; if we did not have to listen to the superintendent, we could send all these children to Harvard, for sure." They dream about making their own school, about having the autonomy to choose the methodology, the staff, the format, and to manipulate the budget. Charter schools give them that opportunity.

Charter schools, like any enterprise, start with vision. If you do not know what you believe, why are you doing it? If you do not think it has an impact, then you ought not get out of bed in the morning. But we also have to translate vision into action, or the vision is empty. That is why the process of writing the charter is important, because you must think out the vision and put it on paper. You must invent the promise that children will have bright futures as a result of what you have written. You must invent the transformative place that charter schools are. The charter grants autonomy and the ability to get away from bureaucratic restraints, but with that comes responsibility and accountability. People who create charter schools can choose staff, themes, methodologies, schedules, manage budgets, and all the rest. Charter schools are small enough to make every plan and every dream happen.

In return for the freedom to do the dream, we want quantifiable results. We want these new schools to prove that they are different by making children read better, write better, think better, compute better, be better able to manage their lives and negotiate success, and give back to society what we have given them through the autonomy of these schools. The partner of autonomy is accountability. There are no more excuses, because you wrote the charter, you made the promise. The fundamental question is can these charter schools produce? Charter schools have to prove that their students are equal to anyone who comes out of Choate, Deerfield, and Andover. Public schools can do that. Where the rubber hits the road is the statistics. The test of a good school, charter or non-charter is: what are the hard numbers? How can a school call itself successful if it cannot prove that children are better in quantifiable ways because they have been there? It is wonderful to do the stroking, but the newspapers are not interested in stories about which school stroked the children most. They publish articles about whether the kids can read and do math, and at what level.

A lot of people are motivated to apply for charters because they see children who have been so damaged in district schools, or because nobody has taken into account the devastating homes that they come from, or the fact that their parents have split up, and that they live under terrible conditions. I hear wonderful liberal people saying, "I do not even understand how these children arrive at school sane." There are a lot of people who lament stuff, but do not do stuff. They are the strokers. The strokers say things like, "These children are black, they are brown, they just came to this country. You cannot push them, because if you push them, you know, they are already fragile." But stroking only makes those children more fragile and more vulnerable, because by stroking we guarantee that they will never get the American dream.

Just last night, a young teacher said to me, "Dr. Monroe, I heard all that you said concerning quantifiable results in tests. But surely there are other ways to measure whether or not children are learning. Teaching to the test is just so restraining." I have become less and less patient with this attitude, because the people who say this to me always speak absolutely flawless English. They have gone to incredible schools. They have been through exactly the same process that they want to deny the children they are teaching. I said, "My dear, the tests are not going away. They are the measure to which these children are held. It is your responsibility and your duty to train the children to get through them, because the external world judges students who do poorly on them as uneducated. If you want some alternative form of assessment in addition, give them a portfolio as well. But there is no alternative to testing in the external world." She kept arguing, and in the end, I had to turn away. I am tired of the kind of rhetoric that does not want to hold all children to the same high standard that people pay thousands of dollars for in private schools.

I ran Frederick Douglass Academy like a private school. Visitors thought it was a private school. The children wore uniforms. They took the standardized examinations. They traveled all over the world. They learned physics and calculus. We offered four languages: French, Spanish, Japanese and Latin. Somebody asked, "Why Japanese?" I said, "Why not? If these children were born in Japan, they'd learn Japanese." The question really was, "Why should these black children in Harlem learn Japanese?" Why Latin? Because really great schools teach Latin. Latin is a great un-locker for these incredible exams that they have to take. Creating a private school in the public sector is quite possible. Of that first class of about 90 kids, we had 96 percent college acceptance rate, to schools like Columbia, Smith, Temple, Penn State, Fiske, Morehouse, Spellman.

People accused us of creaming Harlem, but it was not about creaming. It was about taking the children who came to us and teaching them that they could be wonderful. How did we do it? First and foremost, we held high academic standards and expectations for the children. There can be no Mickey Mouse courses, no business math, or business English. There has to be forthright curriculum where there is academic rigor. At the academy, we had mandatory tutorial. If you did not know the subject matter, you could not go home. We sent notes to the parents, saying, "You will not see your child in sunlight again until he or she has mastered this subject." And then we aced tests, because we knew the city was watching us. Our

very first year in the seventh grade, out of 179 middle schools, we were number eleven in reading and math. The next year, we climbed to number four in reading and math. We did it simply because we followed this formula: teach your passion, keep students in school, make them know it, make them love it. This is what private schools do. People pay for academic rigor. Children will do what you expect them to do, what you train them to do.

The movement relies on teachers. School is so powerful that it can override the limitations that the dominant culture places on discounted children because of their color, or where they come from, or who their folks are, or how much love they have, or where they live, or what their first language is. School did that for some of us in this room. I learned how to stand before you and speak this way in the fourth grade, in central Harlem, on 127th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, when one teacher said to me, "I see something in you. Run for secretary." At nine years of age, I was able to stand up and read minutes, ask for corrections and learn Robert's Rules of Order. I never looked back. That did not depend on where I lived, or who my folks were, or what the circumstances were in my parents' marital situation. Every one of us got hooked on something academic because of a teacher who understood that a great teacher is an actor. I remember being an English major teaching Hamlet. When I told my students, "We are going to do Hamlet," I was met with universal groans. I said to them, "I do not care about your groaning. You are 12 years old. You cannot tell me what you are interested in. I do not listen to 11- and 12-year-old children regarding curriculum. You will learn to love Shakespeare. The reason why Shakespeare is still read is because beyond costume and time, he is touching universal themes." And then I rattled off the themes of Polonius, the interfering father, and lost love, and betrayal of friendship. I said, "Did you ever have a friend who betrayed you? Did you ever have a girlfriend? Did your father ever say to you, 'Now, before you go out, you've got to remember.'" They said, "Oh, it is about those things?"

We need to hire teachers who teach with passion, so that children do not need to guess why they chose to teach history, a subject that is abysmally taught. Kids ought to get upset about the Crimean War because the teacher in the front of the room is saying, "You may not have heard of it before this morning, but I need to tell you about the Crimean War." The teacher has to be able to grab the students by the throat and say, "I have got you, because I know and love this topic." Charter schools have the ability to get teachers who teach what they love to teach, and say, "Go, set them on fire," without the superintendent saying, "Wait a minute, that teacher is not licensed." That is why the charter school concept is so powerful, because the schools do not have to answer to a whole bunch of funny monkey business people. We know what school is supposed to be, and we will give it to children. Charter schools, and any other great schools, say to the children, "I do not care what the outside environment thinks about you and what you can do. In here, we will make you do it, and make you love doing it. You belong to us. We cannot change what happens out there, but we can change what happens in here. And we can change what your life will be."

Every teacher has to consider himself or herself an advisor or a counselor. You do not teach your subject to children, you teach children your subject. Counselors have to do more than count beans: "You have 12 credits, you need 13 more to graduate." The kid is bleeding arterially in front of the counselor who says that. Many of us here could tell counselor horror stories. I know I can. I saw my high school counselor twice. The first time she said, "You have enough credits to graduate early." The second time she said the most devastating statement, one that I will take to my grave: "Lorraine, there's a test on Saturday. You do not want to come to school on Saturday for a test, do you?" I said, "No, I go to the movies on Saturday." When I came back to school on Monday, a friend asked, "Where were you on Saturday? You missed the Regents scholarship exam." I was president of the class. I was ranked number ten in the class. I do not know whether my counselor was motivated by laziness because she did not want to fill out the next form, or racism, because there are racists who work in our schools, but the experience made me fierce.

In charter schools, every teacher has a responsibility to see the whole of children and not just count the beans, as important as that is. They have to multiply the ways in which children interact with staff. Charter schools need to know that children want more than a talking head from their teachers. Every charter school teacher should run a club, a team, or some extra activity, where kids can see the teacher as another person, as well as a teacher. As a soccer coach, you know something about the student that as an English teacher you did not know. A school needs a wide array of activities for both the nerds and the jocks.

Establishing a network of friends among colleges and universities is also important, so that outside institutions see themselves as being connected with charter schools. There should be no charter school

that does not have a friend in a college, a corporation, a foundation, and a cultural institution. We need people outside who say, "I understand what you are doing. I will be your advocate and a voice to protect you. I will find support for you. I will give you mentors and space. I will give you expert advice in terms of leadership and fellowship." This involvement does not happen by accident. There needs to be intent. If we are going to create these schools, we need to support them.

I was clever enough, in those days when I was not all that clever, to start a program called Friend of My School. I made certificates and invited all the people in the community to a breakfast where I welcomed them as friends of the school. The guests did not know we were friends when they got there, but they were friends when they finished eating. They said, "How are we your friends?" I said, "Well, it just so happens that I have a list of ways you can be friendly to us right here." At the Academy, it succeeded beyond anything that I had ever dreamed. I do not know how it happened, but Dan Cohen from The New York Times became a friend. He appeared one day and he said, "You need a board of directors." Now, everyone knows public schools do not have boards of directors, but I liked the idea. He said, "And you do not need a lot of people on it. There are going to be just the two of us, you and me. We will do whatever you need to have done." As senior vice president of sales and advertising for The New York Times, Dan had a lot of friends. He would come by and say, "What do you need, Lorraine?" I would say, "I need a weight room, Dan." And he would have his friends send checks for the weight room. Little checks started coming in, and soon we had a weight room. We had rugs, but we needed mirrors. So, he comes one day and says, "What do you need?" I said, "Dan, I need mirrors for the weight room." He said, "What does it cost?" I said, "\$1,300." He happened to have in his hand a check from a friend for \$1,300. Of course, we named the room "Dan Cohen's Weight Room with friends." The American-Jewish Committee helped send 15 of us to Israel for two weeks. Marty Singerman of The New York Post sent 23 of us to London for a long weekend of tea and Stratford-on-Avon. These things are important because if we want the charter schools to be different, the children have to have different experiences.

There is something that private schools and good public schools do very well that we need to instill in charter schools. That is the establishment of rituals, ceremonies, and traditions. Private schools have ties, bazaars, and all this stuff that makes kids think, "Wow, we are special." It is the reason I chose uniforms. It is the reason why I did square dancing. People asked, "How come you have 17-year-old boys square dancing?" I said, "Because, in this building, anything that I say is good and sacred. They do it." No, they do not go into the 'hood and say, "Man, I can do-si-do with the best of them," but we created an atmosphere that made anything we said OK. You want to do the May Pole? We will do it. You want to have student-faculty follies? We will do it. Rituals need to be set up so that children can anticipate a routine within the charter school that is often lacking in their families and their communities. The academic expectations, the clubs and teams, the friends, the ceremonies and rituals, do not cost that much more. School is where children spend the most vital times of their lives. We have to realize with a poignancy how incredible the impact of school is on us and on the children. Charter schools are sent to rescue those children.

Lastly, and most importantly, to do the work of transforming children's lives, these schools need to have great leaders. You cannot have a good institution of any kind, whether it is a family, hospital, synagogue, or a school, without having a visionary at the helm. Running a business means that you have to take good, crazy risks. You have to think of your mission. You have to think about why you were chosen to be there. We are talking about changing children's lives, and that should cut through every decision we make, from the highest level of politics to the neighborhoods. That is why leadership is so important, because it is from that bully pulpit that staff and community will hear what we are about. I do not expect everybody to have the same style, but I do expect everybody who leads to have the same belief about outcome and belief about action. Our work is not about following fads, but sticking to the core of it, striking to the heart of what makes good public education. What is powerful about school is that you can create an atmosphere that is so different from where the children come from that you can undo the horrors of their present, temporary circumstance. You can create a place about which a child can say, "Here I am cared for. Here someone loves me. Here they will hold me up. Here they will confirm me. Here they will grab me by the throat when I am wrong. And, I can survive outside until I get back." Quality education comes from autonomy coupled with high accountability. I hope that the charter schools will set a standard for all schools. That is what is happening in New York. Opponents say that choice and charter schools are stealing children from the traditional public schools. But in reality what is happening is a ripple effect from charter and choice going to the other schools. Traditional public schools are saying, "Hey, we can do some of the things that the charters are doing." There is a groundswell from this group of

creatively crazy people and educators and other concerned people, who will put their hearts and minds and hands to the task of creating transformative schools that will create new futures for the children that they accept. We can do it if we are willing.

I want you to think of the work with charter schools that you have committed yourselves to as the work that can transform children's lives beyond recognition, by the force that it lets loose in the world. The work is electrifying and desperately powerful, shattering in its wonder.

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