

A School with a Money-Back Guarantee

by Scott Payne

In Lansing, Michigan, one finds a new wrinkle in education: a money-back guarantee. HOPE Academy, a primary and secondary school operated for profit by Eleanor Sambaer and Marina Farhat makes this unique offer: *Give us your kindergartner. If, by the end of the academic year, your child can't read at least on a second-grade level, you get your money back.*

The guarantee is one means by which HOPE's founders have given a future both to their school and to their dream of offering children an education of the highest caliber. Mrs. Sambaer and Mrs. Farhat began HOPE (Heightened Options in Private Education) because they believe that public schools neither challenge children academically, nor support families' beliefs and moral codes.

That the pair even managed to open HOPE is remarkable. Early on, they discovered that one cannot set up classrooms in, say, an empty store. State and local codes require prohibitively expensive retrofitting of wiring and plumbing, the addition of fire walls and security doors, removal of asbestos, plus a myriad of other requirements having little to do with education.

The women sidestepped these obstacles when they found a home for HOPE in a partly vacated public school dating from the 1930s. Like the school's oak doors and bannisters, the desks exhibit years of battering, but this doesn't concern HOPE's owners. "The amount of money public education wastes on brand-new architecture and pretty new desks is crazy," they say. "Education takes place in the mind. Old desks and 50-year-old buildings don't matter."

When the two women opened HOPE in 1985, half of its first 35 students were black children from inner-city homes—a proportion that persists

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today. HOPE's enrollment rose to 68 in 1986 and 80 in 1987.

HOPE Academy's teaching methods were inspired by Marva Collins' Westside Preparatory School in Chicago. Mrs. Farhat, in fact, attended Mrs. Collins' teacher-training program and employs some of the techniques Mrs. Collins has revived from the past:

- minute-to-minute teacher contact with each pupil
- strong non-denominational religious emphasis in the curriculum
- reliance upon timeless Western literature from *The Iliad* through *The Little Red Hen*
- use of phonics in reading instruction
- insistence on mastery of standard spoken English, with enforced use of complete sentences in classroom discourse
- relentless emphasis on neatness and proper conduct.

But whereas Marva Collins can subsidize Westside Prep with royalties from her books and fees from her lecture tours, no such resources were available to Mrs. Farhat or Mrs. Sambaer. By the end of 1988, HOPE seemed headed for financial collapse, despite holding costs to \$3,000 per student (substantially less than Michigan's public schools). "When I look back on what we went through," Marina Farhat says, "I'm surprised we were able to keep going."

The problem, in part, was that neither woman was trained in business. Mrs. Farhat is a teacher, and Mrs. Sambaer is a nurse. They were offering a unique curriculum, but in the manner of public schools: 8:00 to 4:00 daily, nine months a year. Perhaps the only thing keeping HOPE open was its founders' sense of mission.

Farhat and Sambaer wanted HOPE to train the

intellect. "We want our children to be able to think and act for themselves in a free society," Marina Farhat says. Whereas public education stresses feelings above reasoning, she says, she and her partner want HOPE to do the opposite. "You can't expect to lead life based on good feelings," Marina Farhat says. "We want children to be able to deal with the things that *don't* make them feel good."

Many parents would agree with that remark, but debates between liberal and conservative educators go over most laymen's heads. Accordingly, a businessman challenged HOPE's owners to stop responding to public education's feel-good jargon. He suggested instead that they focus on all parents' instinctive expectation of education: that their children leave school better equipped for life than were the parents when they completed their own schooling. And the only way parents can assess that, he added, is by observing how their youngsters measure up against other children. The thought chimed with Marina Farhat's feeling that large numbers of black parents want their children to attend HOPE to acquire the skills and training the parents themselves did not derive from public education.

Sacrifice and Commitment

Enrolling children at HOPE means sacrifice for most inner-city parents. One working couple with a modest income pays \$710 a month in tuition for three daughters—a kindergartner, a first-grader, and a third-grader. The school has no scholarship program, though the HOPE Academy Foundation is a vehicle through which contributors could assist with tuition. Farhat and Sambaer oppose full-ride scholarships, however. They believe direct parental financial commitment contributes to quality schooling.

That impression dovetails with the businessman's perception of preschool and kindergarten as the keys to the school's survival and growth. If parents could discern substantial progress in their children at those school levels, he said, they would not view tuition as a sacrifice—particularly not in the case of HOPE's year-long preschool which isn't available at all through public education. He further challenged Farhat and Sambaer not just to pay lip service to making a profit, but to pursue profit because it is the most reliable feedback. If HOPE is good, he told them, it will earn money.

The public schools' product is free, he added, so you've got to show the consumer that their product is not in the same league with yours.

Seeing their school through a businessman's eyes surprised HOPE's owners. They hadn't realized that by adopting public education's 8-to-4 day, they overlooked the convenience of parents, their sole revenue source. They also realized that public education's three-month summer vacation is a remnant of agrarian times that teachers' unions protect as a perk. But for a private school, summer vacation is a heavy cost. Rent and insurance payments don't stop in June—so revenue must not stop, either. Thus, Sambaer and Farhat put HOPE and its teachers on a year-around schedule.

With the help of a consultant, they developed a marketing campaign featuring the money-back guarantee for kindergartners. They also began fitting HOPE's schedule to parents' schedules, 6:30 A.M. to 6:15 P.M., so the school is a home away from home, and HOPE preschoolers and pupils need not be latchkey kids. Enrollment has climbed to 200—still equally divided between suburban and inner-city families—and the school is solvent. In addition to its preschool, HOPE's summer schedule offers remedial training for public school students and accelerated classes for students who want to get ahead.

Summer also is when HOPE screens prospective transfer enrollees to ascertain whether their work habits and academic skills are up to HOPE's speed—and, if not, to get them there. "Often we find that public school students just don't have work habits. And their skills aren't at a point that they can handle HOPE's program," Marina Farhat says. "Sometimes we have to tell parents that we must hold their child back a year."

In addition, Sambaer and Farhat are thinking about offering a full summer semester at HOPE. Marina Farhat says parents seem equally divided about enrolling their youngsters in the summer, but she believes that in a year or two HOPE will provide the option.

Meanwhile, she chuckles over the year-long debate in the state capitol about "equalizing" funding for public education's "rich" school districts, which spend \$6,000 per pupil per year, and "poor" districts that spend only \$4,000.

"Boy, with that kind of money . . ." she grins. "Well, we think we're doing pretty well here with only \$3,000." □

Private Treasures at Antietam

by Jo Ann Frobouck

The 1990 PBS documentary “The Civil War” stirred our emotions and sparked a renewed interest in the battlefields of the war. *Newsweek* noted that 14 million Americans—more than the entire population of the Confederacy—viewed the series, “rekindling old partisan passions” and raising questions about the meaning and memories of war. Literally overnight, legions of converts joined the ranks of preservationists answering the call to “save hallowed ground.”

Nowhere is this pressure felt more keenly than in Sharpsburg, Maryland, where 23,000 soldiers fell on September 17, 1862, making the Battle of Antietam the war’s bloodiest day. The creation of a national cemetery in 1867 at Sharpsburg, coupled with 1890 legislation establishing the Antietam National Battlefield Site, made Antietam a model for land-protection strategies. Long before PBS brought the war into our living rooms, Antietam was under the preservation microscope.

Since 1988, the National Park Service (NPS), working in concert with preservation organizations, has been developing a new general management plan at Antietam that will govern the management, use, and interpretation of park resources. The plan reviews changing land-use patterns to determine if they threaten the “integrity” (original character) of the battlefield. It calls for a public takeover of some privately held lands

within Antietam’s 3,245-acre boundary to restore the historic scene and provide for tourist use of planned “interpretive plazas.”

The private landowners who have been Antietam’s faithful stewards, some for generations, are viewed by the NPS as impediments to the planned restoration. Their reward for preserving Antietam’s pristine setting, virtually unchanged since the Civil War, may be the loss of their land and their heritage—a heritage that goes back 200 years, long before the Civil War.

The NPS plan prescribes land-use sanctions for other tracts along the perimeter that provide a visual backdrop for the park. To preserve the view from a central point, forced scenic easements will prohibit the erection of new farm structures such as barns, sheds, and silos.

Some farmers may be subjected to public right-of-way easements across their land, jeopardizing farming operations. The NPS plan, by endorsing such sanctions and controls, would reduce the viability of farming—which it is supposed to protect.

In 1990, the Conservation Fund, a private land trust, quietly bought a working farm inside the park boundary. Even though the Park Service has eminent-domain authority to protect land within the park, the NPS urged the purchase to save “blood-spilled” ground from exploitation. With great pomp and circumstance, the land was donated to the federal government last year.

The land, which was not imperiled, will not be any more protected: The only thing that changed is the name on the deed. The American public becomes the caretaker, footing the bill for maintenance and management.

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