

A Teacher Who Made a Difference

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SMALL VICTORIES

The Real World of a Teacher, Her Students, and Their High School

By Samuel G. Freedman
Harper & Row. 431 pp. \$22.95

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MOST CITIZENS realize how crucial the improvement of inner-city public schools is to the future well-being of American society, but many may be tiring of school reform debates dominated by officials who are far removed from the daily reality of classroom teaching. Samuel Freedman's intimate, charming portrait of the 1987-88 school year

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at New York City's Seward Park High School is an immensely persuasive corrective, reminding anyone who may have forgotten that the way individual teachers interact with individual students is the inescapable centerpiece of every elementary or secondary school.

Freedman's winsome and beautifully written book focuses on one particular Seward Park English teacher, 39-year-old Jessica Siegel, a University of Chicago graduate who first came to the school in 1978 after stints as a

secretary and as a writer for a small left-wing news service. Paid less than \$30,000 for teaching some 150 pupils per day—five classes of approximately 30 students each—Siegel spends most of her evenings and many of her weekends grading homework and planning lessons. Utterly devoted to her uncompensated role as advisor to the student newspaper, Siegel also invests what otherwise would be her free time in marketing her graduating seniors to college admissions officers.

No reader will be able to resist rooting for

Siegel as she and several equally dedicated colleagues struggle with administrators, lethargic bureaucrats and talented but troubled students. Freedman's portrayal is effective, however, not because it stresses Siegel's uniqueness but because it makes the reader realize that her special qualities are shared by thousands of other teachers, who make a similarly significant difference in the lives of many of their students.

Small Victories is equally good at offering memorable portraits of Siegel's students. Seward Park is an ethnically polyglot school in the heart of Manhattan's Lower East Side, a poverty-stricken neighborhood which for decades has served as the first home for newly arrived immigrant groups. Whether Chinese or Dominican, Puerto Rican or Hungarian, Seward Park's students share both economic struggle and unfamiliarity with English as a first language. They

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Jessica Siegel (left) with her students at Seward Park High School

The Real World of a Teacher

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also share, largely because of economic class, a status as the almost-forgotten members of New York's bizarrely bifurcated social structure. The 1980s witnessed a situation where not only "the two fastest-growing types of households in the city became the one living beneath the poverty level and the one earning more than \$120,000 a year," but, as Freedman notes, "not one member of the Board of Education, not one citywide elected official, had children in the public schools." Since the same is true for most members of the city's economic elite, and since New York State, by conscious policy choice, allocates 17 percent less in per-pupil funding for city schools than for all others in the state, it comes as little surprise when Freedman observes that "the undeniable message was that public education no longer mattered to New York."

FREEDMAN's success in succinctly painting that larger context, and in rendering the stressful family and neighborhood challenges facing Seward Park's students, makes Jessica Siegel's energetic devotion all the more memorable and impressive. But *Small Victories'* dramatic power is most enhanced by the increasing likelihood, evident by the book's mid-point, that Freedman's story and the 1987-88 school year at Seward Park will both end with Jessica Siegel's decision to leave teaching before the demanding daily grind wears her down any further.

Most every reader will feel the pain of a tragic ending as Freedman describes Siegel's emotion-filled decision. Why should such a tremendously good teacher, one adored by both many of her colleagues and many of her students, decide that she has to leave? Far more than her low salary, far more than inadequate professional and emotional support, it is the long hours and the unremitting intensity of emotional giving that wear Siegel down. Freedman quotes Siegel's colleague and mentor, Ben Vachs, to emphasize that "what you have to have—and it's indispensable—is the ability to show your caring to the kids." Siegel, like every good teacher, possesses that ability, just as thousands of passive time-servers do not. But that ability can be regenerated and preserved only if it is given sustenance and support, and far too often in today's America public school teachers are not given anywhere near enough.

At heart it is not a question simply of money, but of status, respect and recognition. Unfortunately but undeniably, however, salary levels are viewed as the primary indicators of status and recognition throughout most of American society. Students aspire to be, say, doctors or lawyers, not because they believe those to be the most remunerative occupations but because they perceive them to be among the most respected occupations.

Few readers of *Small Victories* will leave the book with much doubt that the thousands of Jessica Siegels across America contribute far more to the betterment of American society than do corporate lawyers, or

arbitrageurs, or almost any other occupation. In particular, no reader of *Small Victories* would question that a Jessica Siegel in the classroom is more valuable to American education than any administrator or central office bureaucrat yet born or discovered. But most of those readers will also acknowledge that we all, almost without thinking about it, accord the average lawyer or school administrator or government official whom we meet significantly greater regard than we do someone who says she teaches English at Seward Park High School.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Samuel Freedman's superb book is that it leaves one pondering how we might remedy the tremendous disjuncture between the acknowledged importance of teaching and the very modest status we assign it. If, say, no non-teaching administrator could earn more than a Jessica Siegel, perhaps teachers, parents and—most important—students might not only better appreciate the primacy of teaching over administering, but might aspire to teaching more than to less valuable, but higher-paid, higher-status positions. Or, more radically, what if Cravath, Swaine, and Akin Gump, and Sidley & Austin, among others, suddenly started offering beginning associates the same salary that a beginning school teacher receives in Washington or New York? The redistributive impact would be small, but the message to students—to those who read the road map of American social status and decide where they want to head—would be incalculable. *Small Victories* should make us think about altering the occupational status of public school teaching, and, if it does, Samuel Freedman's achievement—like Jessica Siegel's—will have been doubly valuable. ■