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Full Speed Ahead

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For so long, it seemed like common sense. Children of different abilities required different teachers, different texts, different classrooms, different speeds and approaches. Tailoring the education to the child was simply a matter of efficacy, and, over the past three decades, the idea has spawned an array of pullout courses--for the slow student, the advanced student, the limited-English speaker. Such courses were often dubbed "special." This approach, once so lauded, now goes by a more ominous name: tracking.

Among those most responsible for tracking's new pejorative spin is Henry Levin, a Stanford University economist and educator. For the past decade, Levin has been railing against tracking wherever he finds it and offering in its place his own brand of education reform.

Levin's model for educating disadvantaged students turns conventional wisdom on its head. Rather than offering such children remedial instruction, which ultimately leaves them even further behind, he believes schools should accelerate their instruction so they can catch up with their more advantaged peers. All students, regardless of supposed abilities, Levin argues, should be challenged with the same demanding curriculum.

In Levin's view, this egalitarian ethos should carry over into every aspect of school life. In fact, schools that join his expanding reform network must agree to reorganize along democratic lines, with everyone in the school community participating in the design and operation of the program.

Levin founded his Accelerated Schools Project in 1986 with two elementary schools in the San Francisco Bay area and no clear idea where the effort would lead. By the beginning of the current academic year, approximately 700 schools in 34 states had jumped in. And this year, two entire school systems have adopted Levin's ideas districtwide, a challenging first. In addition, 10 "accelerated school centers" have been established in different parts of the country to train teachers and spread the gospel. (One, much to Levin's chagrin, recently declared its independence, becoming a for-profit business.) Levin has been hailed by The New York Times as one of the nation's nine educational "Standard Bearers."

"Hank is the kind of person who doesn't just talk about things; he goes out and does them," says Brown University professor Theodore Sizer, founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, another national reform initiative. "The academic world is full of critics, and he is a good critic. But he is also an actor, and that kind of courage is rare in academics."

Success has washed over Levin more like a tidal wave than a soft summer rain. He has had to struggle to keep up with his accomplishments and growing reputation. He seems, for example, profoundly uncomfortable with his new guru status, and it is obvious that his now-prosperous life does not always comport with his self-image. He still delights in his radical past, and those days--now two decades behind him--are always on the tip of his tongue. A neat man, Levin keeps his ever-present buttoned-down shirt opened at the collar, as if to broadcast a relaxed air. But he is hardly relaxed. His energy level is more typical of Wall Street than academe. He leans back stiffly on an overstuffed couch in his tasteful but eclectically furnished house, fidgets with his glasses, folds his arms tightly across his chest, looks intently forward, and talks and talks.

He speaks at times with passion, at times with painful self-doubt. He volunteers that his doctorate in economics came from Rutgers University, which he apparently does not consider a top-notch institution. "I had gotten into all the places I applied and had graduated magna cum laude from New York University," he adds apologetically. He was a jock, at one time ranking sixth in the nation in the three-mile run. "But I was too busy to train for the Olympics," he explains, as if we were wondering what had gone terribly wrong with his track career.

When it comes to education and social issues, however, the clarity of Levin's ideas and the force of his convictions ring crisp and unapologetic. He now envisions a time, in the not too distant future, when his reform model is widely embraced. "Not now but 20 years from now," he says, "it will just be an accepted way of doing things. How can we have punished kids? How can we have separated them out? How can we have treated [teachers] so badly that their ideas didn't count?"

When Levin left Rutgers in the mid-1960s, he was married with two children and saddled with what he saw as a regretful load of adult responsibility on his shoulders. He landed a job as an economist at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. Given a choice of prefixes to attach to his door--health economics, social welfare economics, educational economics--he chose the last. His studies up to that point had been what he ruefully calls "straight economics," focused, as they were, on explaining the world through complex statistical models. He welcomed the chance to tackle the problems of education.

In 1966, James Coleman released his landmark Equality in Educational Opportunity Report. The conclusion most educators took from the document was that schools have relatively little influence on children's achievement compared with their family background and general social context. Among other things, the report found that "the extent to which an individual feels he has some control over his own destiny" has more influence on students than all other school factors combined. The study also found that African Americans in integrated schools felt they had a greater sense of control than those in other settings. Advocates for integration saw this finding as a smoking gun and repeatedly used the report in court cases to attack segregation in schools. But while Levin sympathized with their cause, he thought it was wrong to base a social movement on cold

regression analysis. Change, he believed, should be postulated on agreed-upon values and democratic principles.

"In the final analysis, you don't want to reduce the issues of segregation to a few questions on a test," he says, leaning forward for emphasis. "If the next person coming along finds that blacks in white environments have lower test scores, do we then turn our backs on desegregation? I stood for a value position which pissed people off because they thought they would win the day by saying science tells us which way to go, and I knew it was bad science. And I also knew the real issue was what kind of world we want to live in. What do we mean by democracy? What do we mean by fairness?"

Here is Hank Levin at his best, articulating the recurring themes of everything he has done in his diverse professional life. His research has ranged from worker cooperatives in Spain to iron and iodine deficiencies in Third World countries, from straight statistical analyses of educational finance to hands-on education reform. But the words democracy and fairness continually crop up. "One thing that defines my work," he says, "is that I've always loved democracy, in all its forms."

After the Coleman report, Levin began carving a career out of criticizing major social science documents. In addition, he volunteered as a long-term substitute teacher at a predominantly African-American junior high school in Washington, started demonstrating against the war in Vietnam, and organized conferences on local control of education. His work began to get him noticed. In 1968, he was approached by the University of Illinois, the University of Michigan, Brown University, and Stanford. The dean of Stanford's school of education told Levin that he envisioned a multidisciplinary academy of applied social science, not a typical teacher-training program. Northern California, at that particular time, had a special allure for Levin, a long-haired activist who had never been west of Indiana. He took the Stanford job and headed for the West Coast. "It was so different, you know?" he says with a big smile. "I saw hummingbirds for the first time." Levin has been at Stanford for 26 years; he was tenured in 1975.

Meeting Levin's wife, Pilar (his first marriage ended in divorce), you begin to understand how he has managed to avoid the many trappings of the ivory tower. He met Pilar, then Pilar Soler, a Spaniard with a passion for education, while traveling in Venezuela in 1970. She moved in a year later, and they married in 1975. Slightly built but as blustery as her husband, Pilar, who directs the training component of the Accelerated Schools Project, does not hesitate to correct Levin as he talks about his work. They argue publicly but good-naturedly. Their talk centers on education, even around the breakfast table, as they help their 9-year-old daughter, Bianca, with her homework. The house rings with Spanish and English. It is clear this is a team effort.

By the mid-1980s, in no small part because of his wife's prodding irreverence, Levin was overcome with the uncomfortable feeling that he had spent his life debunking other people's ideas about schools without offering a constructive solution of his own. "There was something fundamentally wrong with what I had done," he says. "I had pointed out

the problem, but I didn't feel good about these conventional solutions and the vagueness of, 'We've got to do something about the schools.' "

He had just worked through a crowning philosophical critique of A Nation At Risk, the landmark federal report prophesying economic decline brought on by the mediocrity of American education and the U.S. work force. The report argued for tough new standards in mathematics, science, and foreign languages, among other things. From his seemingly tangential studies of worker cooperatives, Levin believed that economic productivity had more to do with workplace organization than with the educational levels of workers. And from his teaching days in Washington, D.C., he realized that it was ridiculous to create tougher standards for students before they had mastered the standards of the day. It was absurd, he argued, to expect students to read French when they couldn't even read English.

As the drumbeat for tougher standards and more rigorous courses grew louder, Levin decided something was going unsaid. Either the war on poverty had been quietly won and the illiterate kids he had worked with in the public schools no longer existed, or the ruling elite had decided the disadvantaged simply didn't matter. He decided to speak out. The state of California commissioned him to write a report on how A Nation At Risk had failed to address the problems of the poorest children. That was followed by a similar national report for Public/Private Ventures, a think tank based in Philadelphia. Still, there was no "Levin solution."

Then, in 1985, Levin set out on a journey to visit schools in various communities across the country, from a Navajo Reservation in the Southwest to New York City. "They were just very unhappy places for human beings," he recalls. It was on this trip that he began formulating the ideas that would become the accelerated schools model. He saw, firsthand, how conventional remedial programs were irreparably harming disadvantaged students. The cure seemed so simple and logical: Don't slow these students down, speed them up.

"Anytime you start to sort out kids, you eventually build categories with given assumptions," Levin says. "If you start off saying this child is at risk, you're saying this child is defective. So we send the child to the repair shop. The problem is, you'll never make the child whole when you stigmatize the child in every possible way. You make the child see that he or she isn't as good as the others. And in the meantime, other kids are moving ahead. Once the child is in the repair shop, he or she will never be out of the repair shop."

Levin makes it clear that there is no true model of what an "accelerated school" should look like. But as he and others acknowledge, there are some common traits among those that now exist. Most challenge all students with advanced mathematics and teach reading using a "whole language" approach. Hands-on science projects are the norm. In many schools, textbooks have been replaced by a wide range of other resources, including books, magazines, and newspapers. Most have abandoned orderly rows of desks in favor of a cooperative-learning approach. Students cluster together in groups as teachers and

aides circulate around the room. Parents are free to roam the hallways and sit in on classes. Some help out in the principal's office.

The various adults in an accelerated school classroom try to build on students' strengths. They find out what students are good at and then proceed from there, rather than searching for weaknesses and focusing on those. Specific pedagogy, however, is largely left up to the teachers. This is central to Levin's belief that teachers should be empowered to make their own decisions regarding classroom practice.

What is not left up to the individual schools and teachers is the baseline approach to reform and organization. Staff members, students, and parents must agree to draw up a central vision and then reorganize the school around that vision. It is this participatory governance structure that is the most prescriptive--and perhaps the most difficult and onerous--aspect of the Levin model.

Participating schools are required to form three decisionmaking bodies. On one end of the spectrum is what Levin calls the School as a Whole, which is made up of the principal, teachers, teachers' aides, and other staff members, as well as parent and student representatives. This body approves all major school decisions on topics ranging from curriculum and instruction to resource allocation. On the other end of the spectrum are the "cadres," small groups set up to address specific topics, such as curriculum, assessment, or parental participation. Finally, there is the Steering Committee, which is made up of the principal, a representative of each cadre, and other teachers, aides, staff members, and parents.

The cadres meet once a week. The Steering Committee, which monitors the cadres and develops recommendations for the School as a Whole, meets on a biweekly basis. And the School as a Whole meets quarterly. If this all sounds vaguely socialistic, it is. The model is a direct outgrowth of Levin's studies of democratic workplaces and worker cooperatives.

The rigid governance structure differentiates the Accelerated Schools Project from a number of other reform models, such as Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools. The coalition offers high schools direction for school organization, based on a set of principles, but prescribes nothing.

Still, other reform programs, most notably Robert Slavin's Success for All Schools initiative, are even more prescriptive than Levin's. Slavin, director of elementary education at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students, prescribes not only an organizational model but also specific educational materials and pedagogical approaches. In fact, Slavin thinks the accelerated schools program isn't nearly prescriptive enough. By giving schools a nonnegotiable, step-by-step approach to reform, Slavin says, he can go into the most impoverished, dysfunctional schools in the nation and turn them around quickly. He suggests that Levin is not in such a rush because many of his schools are not in such dire straits to begin with.

Levin admits it will take a school at least five years to implement his model properly. "Our patron saint is Mae West because she said anything worth doing is worth doing slowly," he says, drawing the word "slowly" out for several seconds. "We always tell people we haven't a clue what she was talking about, but it works for us."

For Levin, it is the organizational model--and only the organizational model--that is nonnegotiable. "The process is prescriptive, very prescriptive," he says, unapologetically, "and we're merciless and unforgiving to people who say, 'Well, we like this part, but we don't like this part.' It's holistic. It all fits together."

Some educators find this aspect of the model attractive; it can provide a firm starting point for schools that have no clear sense of direction. But after a time, it can become a burden. In November 1993, San Francisco's Daniel Webster Elementary School, Levin's very first accelerated school, voted to abandon the program, after a long slide away from it. Wilhelmina Santamaria, the principal who originally brought the model to Webster, had left the school after attaining some degree of fame touting it. Her successors were less committed.

"The program helped us out in terms of restructuring, but it was time for us to move on, for getting off the leash," says David Wong, Webster Elementary's current principal. "There were certain things they wouldn't allow us to change, especially the governance structure, and we found it a little bit cumbersome."

The fate of Webster hurts Levin. It was there, in 1986, that he first put his ideas into practice. Webster, located on Potrero Hill, one of San Francisco's worst neighborhoods, was ranked 65th out of the city's 69 elementary schools. And it was plagued by disciplinary problems. Levin quickly recognized that there was no united disciplinary policy. Each classroom had its own policy, lenient or severe, enforced or unenforced. The principal herself provided no consistent guidance. She might punish one child but spare another simply because of a pressing lunch date. "It was just a nasty system," Levin says. "And what did kids learn from it? That there is no system, that everyone has their own rules, and that it's what you can get away with that counts, which tells them that they should be very sneaky and cunning. They weren't learning good values."

In 1987, Webster's Behavior Cadre hit upon a simple but novel solution, what it called the Big Three: There was to be no name-calling, no fighting, and everyone was to treat everyone else in the school with courtesy and respect. The Big Three were posted everywhere--in classrooms, in the cafeteria, and in hallways. After the first violation, students had to apologize. After the second, they had to write a letter asking forgiveness. The third always meant a trip to the principal's office. The fourth would result in a parent-principal meeting and possibly suspension. Once adopted, few students got to stage three.

Everyone considered it a concrete success, an auspicious beginning. And Webster became a kind of showcase school for Levin. But in the grand scheme of things, the early successes proved ephemeral. Before bowing out, Daniel Webster did raise its academic

standing--but not dramatically. By 1993, Webster students were ranked 54th in reading and 45th in math.

Nowadays, Levin steers educators who are curious about his model to Thomas Edison, an elementary school in Sacramento.

Like many of California's social and economic problems, the difficulties at Thomas Edison are not immediately visible to the visitor, at least not by typical big-city standards. The school is located in a residential neighborhood on Sacramento's west side, right across from a grassy park. Above the entrance into the school's main courtyard, brightly stenciled letters spell out Thomas Edison Accelerated School. The campus is alive with activity. Students play basketball and four-corners in a neat, open playground. It looks chaotic but only in the way that all elementary schools look before the opening bell on a sunny morning just days before summer vacation.

The various agendas for this week's cadre meetings are posted in the office. There is the Self-Esteem Cadre, the Evaluation and Assessment Cadre, the Curriculum and Instruction Cadre, and the School Climate and Activities Cadre. A bulletin board reminds staff members to "please read before Friday's meeting the Curriculum and Instruction Cadre's quality-report findings." A sign in tidy Magic Marker reads: "Students, Parents, Community, and School Staff Working Together."

But as principal Gene Chasin remembers, that wasn't always the case. In fact, when Chasin arrived at Edison in the fall of 1989, the school was just short of hell and sliding. "All I did was put out fires, suspend kids, and call in parents," Chasin says. "All I did was deal with angry people."

"This was a school that nobody wanted to teach at," says 2nd grade teacher Lynne Fujitani, who arrived at Edison in 1986. "It was an increasingly low-income area. It wasn't really going anywhere."

She and others recall how the school would receive binder after binder of state-mandated programs. Teachers were working harder and harder, only to see test scores slide and behavioral problems increase. They spent hours filling out book-length evaluation forms and would get back "failure trees"--cryptic diagrams of what was going wrong--to post in the staff room.

At a point along this slide toward the urban abyss, something happened at Edison. Parents, students, and staff formed a "futuring" group to explore the school's options. Members checked out several school reform models and decided to go with Levin's. They had narrowed the programs to Slavin's, Sizer's and Levin's. In the end, they decided that Slavin's was too prescriptive; it would not have given the staff a sense of ownership or empowerment. Sizer's, on the other hand, left teachers with no clear sense of where and how to start, and besides, it was primarily a high school model. Levin's struck the group as a middle ground, with a clear beginning point and room for experimentation.

In 1991, the entire Edison staff received training in the accelerated schools approach. Remedial programs--and all other forms of tracking--would be abandoned. Every teacher would know what was going on in everyone else's classroom, and all would be subject to criticism. The school would devise its own budget; even students would have a say. The training was arduous, time-consuming, and threatening, the staff members recall. Two teachers quit. Two others chose to retire.

"It was a hard thing to get used to, that we were going to decide the curriculum, the budgets, that we would all be responsible for all the children, not just our own," Fujitani says. "And it was a slow, frustrating process. But sometimes you have to take a step back and look at what you've been doing and where you're going. I'm very proud of our school."

The staff members who stuck it out now swear by the model. They say it has increased parental involvement and worked wonders in the classrooms. When Chasin arrived at Edison in 1989, 36 percent of the 360 students were receiving public assistance. Just three years later, enrollment had grown to 494 students, with 80 percent of them on some form of public assistance. But over the same period, the student mobility rate dropped from 30 percent to 23 percent, and student suspensions fell from a total of 103 days to 34. What's more, the number of school break-ins dropped from seven the year Chasin arrived to zero.

But there is other evidence, as well, that Edison's transformation into an accelerated school has paid off. Sixth grade test scores in reading, language, and mathematics are up. And Chasin offers grade-by-grade test results as further evidence that the school is on an upswing. During the 1993-1994 school year, for example, 1st graders scored only in the 18th percentile in reading and in the 30th percentile in math on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. But 4th graders scored in the 27th percentile in reading and in the 23rd in math, while the 6th graders scored in the 53rd and 57th percentiles, respectively. The upward progression, Chasin says, is a clear indication that the program is making a difference.

Others seem to agree. Thanks to the San Juan Unified School District's open enrollment policy, Edison now has a waiting list for all grades. And teachers are enrolling their own children in the school.

Students have grown used to serving on the cadres and taking part in other aspects of school decisionmaking. They recently helped set the school's budget priorities by completing a survey about their most cherished educational extras. Did they vote for more Nintendo games and basketballs? No. The big vote getters were for more CD-ROM players and a VCR in each room.

The students have also become adept at extolling the virtues of their school to a stream of visitors. "Every time someone asks me about the cadres, I say it used to be that kids were to be seen and not heard," says 12-year-old Christina Holt. "Now we can be heard, too."

Teachers have made some big leaps, as well. They have begun to grasp, for example, the vague pedagogical idea of building on students' strengths, what Levin calls "power learning." Sixth grade teacher Debbie Stephany now interviews each of her students at the beginning of the year to find out what they feel they are good at. She then moves from those points of strength into areas of weakness, never straying too far from the student's zone of confidence. Lynne Fujitani explains that if one of her students is a good reader and writer but falling behind in science, she addresses the weakness by giving the student specific science-oriented stories and writing exercises that tap into the child's strength and hold his or her interest.

Still, there are those at Thomas Edison who worry about the long-term staying power of the accelerated schools program. Some, for example, wonder whether the experiment would survive if Chasin--like Daniel Webster's Santamaria--were to leave. Chasin is hailed by most at the school as an extraordinary principal. Soft-spoken, with a neatly groomed black beard, he is obviously a committed partner in the reform process and a popular man. As he wanders the playground sporting a colorful tie covered with flags and children's faces of many nations, students wrap themselves around his thin legs.

For lunch today, he has invited two problem children to his office for takeout pizza. One of them, a husky 6th grader named Jeff, unabashedly questions the wisdom of the school's plan to mainstream students with physical and mental disabilities into the regular classroom, the last step in Edison's quest to end separate educational programs. Jeff singles out a particular child as a possible source of trouble.

"Do you think [the student] will start learning from other kids who will be his role models?" asks teacher Debbie Stephany, who has joined Chasin and the boys for lunch.

Jeff shrugs, his closely cropped head cocked on his burly shoulders. "Possibly," he says finally, "but other kids might follow him."

Stephany has her own worries. She wonders how a single reform-minded school can survive within a capricious and overwhelmingly traditional school district. "Where is school reform going if we have to ask permission every step of the way?" she asks.

Her boss shoots her a mild hush-up look, to which she fires back, "No, Chasin. We have to talk about these things.

School choice advocate John Chubb also expresses concern about the staying power of the accelerated schools project, calling Levin, if not naive, at least a little overly optimistic. Chubb came to Stanford as an assistant professor of political science, interested in the regulation and governance of energy. Levin convinced him to switch from energy to education. It was at Stanford that Chubb and economist Terry Moe collected the data for their seminal book on school choice, Politics, Markets & America's Schools. And it was with that book that Chubb and Levin parted philosophical ways.

"His view," says Chubb, now director of curriculum development for the Edison Project, the private educational venture led by entrepreneur Christopher Whittle, "is if educators and researchers come up with answers that work for kids, then somehow the political process can implement them. We say that's not true. The political process will create certain types of schools, and only reforms that fit that mold will be used."

Ironically, the Edison Project has adopted a model of school reform that closely resembles Levin's: high standards, no tracking, and shared governance. But while Levin is seeking to restructure existing schools, Edison wants districts to buy into its model and create brand-new ones. "If you want to try to transform a school, you have to work against an environment that has historically led the school to be the way it already is," Chubb says. "In that sense, you're always swimming upstream, and that's where I think they're being optimistic."

To other Levin critics, especially the advocates of gifted-and-talented pullout programs, Chubb's concerns are tangential. Their criticism is aimed right at the heart of Levin's model: the abolition of pullout programs. They accuse him of sacrificing the nation's best and brightest on the altar of political correctness. Fumes Betty Maxwell, associate director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver: "It's as if someone has a kind of fanatical idea that we need to increase cooperation and good will, that there's too much anger, too much violence, so we need to force-fit people into a model of cooperation that's just not doable."

Like Chubb, Maxwell insists Levin is being overly optimistic. She questions whether teachers can really do all that the accelerated schools model requires of them. Levin, she points out, expects teachers to deftly and creatively handle a wide variety of learning abilities in the classroom and, at the same time, play an active role in school governance. As a result, she argues, the talents of gifted students will be squandered. "If the ideal were there, people could modify what they were doing in the classroom to meet the complexity of gifted children, and that would be fine," Maxwell says. "More power to the teacher who can do that, but he or she is a rare bird."

Levin takes such concerns seriously, and he has responses. The gifted-and-talented label, he says, is only that, a label for students to carry and parents to brag about. In most districts, he notes, special programs for these children last an hour or so a week at the most. "My plea to parents," he says, "is, 'We're going to give your kids gifted-and-talented education 100 percent of the time.' "

Questions about whether the accelerated schools model can be broadly implemented may be answered over the next few years. The sprawling San Jose school district and the much smaller Redondo Beach district, both in California, are currently putting the model in place in all their schools--elementary through high school. The program was designed for elementary schools; it has never been tried at the high school level.

While leaders of national reform projects often find themselves competing for adherents and financial support, they are hesitant to criticize each other's efforts in public. ("The

work is so hard," Sizer says, "so you need drinking buddies, not critics.") But the move by San Jose and Redondo Beach does elicit a rare and hesitant criticism from Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins. "School change is hard work," he says. "To say it is now district policy that everyone will become an accelerated school really means putting a flag in front of a school and not much else. I don't see how it can work. I hope I'm wrong, but that's how I see it."

Levin shares Slavin's concern. He talks about the project becoming too bureaucratic, about having to hire staff, about losing his way. The decision of one of the project's training centers to break off and become Texas Accelerated Schools Inc., a for-profit consulting company, has caused Levin much grief. The center had always charged for training services, retreats, and materials, but as a nonprofit office attached to Texas A&M University. Now, according to co-founder Maria Fernandez, the new, independent incarnation can be more efficient, charge less, and be responsive to market needs.

"We are really fighting it," steams Pilar Levin, who at least wants the accelerated schools name removed from the venture. "It goes against our philosophy. We don't want to be accused of trying to make money."

The brewing battle is another headache emerging from the project's growth and success. The challenge at this stage, Levin says, is to find ways to "keep the philosophy, keep the principles, keep the values, so [the project] doesn't become vulgarized into some mechanical thing that doesn't reach deeply into the schools."

For the program to really take off, Levin knows he must be able to present statistical evidence that demonstrates his model is working. That evidence does not yet exist, but he is implementing a projectwide assessment component he hopes will generate the data he needs.

While statistical evidence may currently be in short supply, anecdotal evidence is not, and Levin rattles off a number of success stories. He points, for example, to Mason Elementary School, in the Roxbury section of Boston. In 1991, the school was down to 147 students and was slated to close. Then Mason became an accelerated school. Last fall, the school opened the year with 300 students and a waiting list for every grade. Test scores are up, student attendance is up, and retention rates have gone from 25 percent to zero.

And then there is Bernard Academy in San Jose. When accelerated school trainers arrived at the middle school four years ago, more than 80 percent of the students were in remedial math classes. Now, every 8th grader takes algebra or geometry, every 7th grader is enrolled in algebra or pre-algebra, and every 6th grader is in "accelerated math."

Stories such as this one convince Levin that his model is changing children's lives. "Kids coming straight from rural Mexico are expected to take pre-algebra or algebra," he says. "The transformations are so profound, you have to believe in it."