

The Schools  
we have



AN AMERICAN  
TEACHER  
ON THE  
FRONT LINE

THE  
SCHOOLS  
WE WANT

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we have*

THE  
SCHOOLS  
WE WANT

An American  
Teacher  
on the  
Front Line



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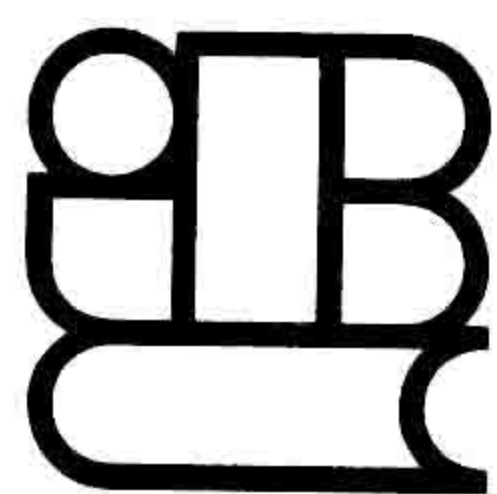
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**James Nehring**

**The  
Jossey-Bass  
Education  
Series**

# Preface

Five years ago I wrote *Why Do We Gotta Do This Stuff, Mr. Nehring?: Notes from a Teacher's Day in School*. Readers told me they liked the book because it was different from all the big reports that came out in the 1980s on The Crisis in Education. My book was “real world,” they said. Now, all the talk is about school reform and the big reports have shifted their focus from the *crisis* in education to *solutions*. There are bold new visions and plans for restructured schools. But because I sense in the latest reports the same kind of unreal quality that prompted my readers' earlier comments, I decided it's time to write another book.

The field of school-reform literature is dominated by university researchers, think tank experts, journalists, “consultants,” and public officials. Their insights are often valid, their advice often sound, and I readily acknowledge a debt to many whose work I've read (see my endnotes). But they *all* write as school outsiders. None works with kids on a regular basis. None starts every morning in a high school classroom and rides out the day with a hundred-plus students who are



sometimes cooperative, sometimes not. And none has real access to that internal adult world of high school: the faculty meetings, the memos, the parent conferences, the talk around the copy machine.

Let me take you, then, inside Amesley Junior-Senior High School, the setting of *Why Do We Gotta Do This Stuff, Mr. Nehring?*, and there let us see what happens when tidy theories of reform and restructuring meet up with the very messy human reality of school. There's a brand-new principal. Her name is Roberta Walters, and she's finding out very quickly about the gulf between theory and practice. Then there's Mr. Nehring and some of his colleagues. You know the type: head-in-the-clouds dreamers who think they can change the system. There are also some tough-minded veteran teachers who've seen it all. And there are parents and board members, administrators and kids. Join us all as we ride the crest of the school-reform wave over a period of two years. Will real change come to Amesley High?

This is a story, not a report. It does not announce a thesis and marshal supporting evidence. It tells a tale. It has characters and plot, drama and humor, and maybe a little bit of mischief. It does not suggest any particular instructional strategy or organizational theory, but it gestures toward certain truths about teaching, learning, and institutional change. If you've read the reports on school reform, all of which offer an important outside perspective, please now read this, a view from the inside.

Finally, this is a work of fiction. Though it draws heavily on my own experience and is intended to be realistic, it is *not* real. With respect to characters especially, I strongly discourage anyone from drawing parallels to people I have worked with. The characters in this book are not simply "masked," they are completely made up. Indeed, in some cases where characters strayed too close to real people I know, I made alterations in the final manuscript.

Many have given generously of their talent and their time to assist me in the project that ultimately became this book. In particular I would like to thank several fellow writ-

ers who endured long group sessions of reading (and rereading): Pauline Bartel, Jackie Craven, Dave Drotar, Joyce Hunt, Kate Kunz, Maureen Lewicki, Peg Lewis, Marie Musgrove, Jane Streiff, and Donna Tomb; also, Ann Connolly, Terri Goldrich, Richard Hughes, Jocelyn Jerry, Peggy O'Rourke, Robin Rapaport, Asta Roberts, and James Yeara. Thanks also go to two colleagues who read the completed manuscript, Dominick DeCecco and Jon Hunter. Thanks also to Lesley Iura, who championed the manuscript at Jossey-Bass. I am grateful, especially, to members of my extended family who cheerfully welcome me on holiday visits even though they know I always arrive with a manuscript.

*July 1992*  
*Delmar, New York*

James Nehring



*For Laurie and Rebecca,  
with all my love.*

# The Author

**James Nehring** teaches social studies and English at Bethlehem Central High School in Delmar, New York. He is the author of *Why Do We Gotta Do This Stuff, Mr. Nehring?: Notes from a Teacher's Day in School* (1989) and serves on the editorial board of *Social Science Record* as book review editor. His work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Education Week*, and *Social Science Record*, and he has made guest appearances on CNN and National Public Radio.

Nehring earned his B.A. degree with high distinction (1980) from the University of Virginia and his master of arts degree in teaching (M.A.T., 1982) from Brown University. He has also studied at the University of Salzburg, in Austria, and is a doctoral candidate in education theory and practice at The University at Albany, State University of New York.

He records the following as especially memorable events: sailing the Nile River from Aswan to Luxor in an old wooden boat, playing his trumpet one night at a West Berlin nightclub near the Wall (which did not tumble down), arguing with Mario Cuomo about the importance of class size,

working as sous-chef for a French restaurant, proposing marriage to Laurie at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, making home-brewed beer with his father, talking backstage with Dizzy Gillespie, receiving an affirmative response at the Canyon rim, serving as faculty advisor to the always controversial student newspaper, singing "Edelweiss" with Rebecca, climbing Cathedral Ledge in New Hampshire, corresponding with Uncle Bix.

James Nehring lives with his wife, Laurie, and daughter, Rebecca. He is at work on a novel about best friends.



They always say that  
time changes things,  
but you actually have to  
change them yourself.

Andy Warhol

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## Who's Accountable Here Anyway?

“... the square kind. You know, the kind that comes out one sheet at a time. Little square pieces. Hard and coarse. I mean, the stuff might as well be sandpaper.”

As a late joiner to the school management team, I had to be caught up on important items already under discussion. I was a late joiner because Don Diegl, who had served for several months, decided one day that he was already overcommitted. He had too many papers to correct anyway since he was an English teacher and couldn't Roberta, the new principal, find someone else to volunteer to fill the spot? Don really did support the concept of shared decision making but he himself just couldn't see his way clear right now and maybe next year and he was very sorry. So Roberta asked me. Which is why on a Thursday afternoon in December I found myself in Conference Room A with four other teachers and the principal, getting caught up on old business.

“But Roberta should tell it,” said English teacher Bill Pierce, who had been trying to fill me in but to whom I was