

Against the Current: How One School Struggled and Succeeded with At-Risk Teens.

By Michael Brosnan.

Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1997.

Have you ever tried to swim against the current and felt the power of the ocean fighting your efforts? The current is the present political and ideological climate in our country—one of the wealthiest nations in the world—where one in five children lives in poverty. Principal Rob DeBlois does this every day, except that he does it sitting in a wheelchair.

Against the Current is the story of the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program as it struggled to emerge as an alternative public school for at-risk middle level students in Providence, R.I., between 1989 and 1996. For students entering the Urban Collaborative, Horace Mann's concept of education as the "Great Equalizer" sounds more like a joke than an inspiring aphorism.

Take Rhonda, for instance, a bright 15-year-old girl, who should be focusing on her high school life, but who instead is plunged into a crisis with which even prepared adults would have a hard time coping. Her father abandoned her when she was a baby, her mother is a drug addict. She lives in a housing project with her grandmother, and is debating whether to continue to attend the Urban Collaborative, because she has just found out she is pregnant.

Whose responsibility is it that Rhonda is pregnant? Hers? To the extent that she knew what her options were, and was making an informed choice, maybe. But isn't it our collective responsibility that Rhonda is, at the age of 15, debating what to do with her life? How did we, as a community, let this happen? How did we let Rhonda down?

Rob DeBlois doesn't let her down. He is fighting for her to remain in school until there is no more hope. And sometimes a miracle does happen; Rhonda decides to stay in school.

The Urban Collaborative was conceived and established by DeBlois, a college friend of Michael Brosnan, author of the book. In many ways, DeBlois is an extraordinary man who has devoted his life to middle school students who are failing in the current school system, and gives them another chance to succeed in a different setting. The Urban Collaborative has all the characteristics of a good school according to current recommendations. It is small, admitting only 75 students a year; its approach to education is student-centered yet demanding; it provides collaborative pedagogy where teaching means coaching more than lecturing.

Students learn to become responsible for their own education. They are given a second chance, but ultimately they must choose whether or not they will seize it. For some this second chance comes too late, painfully reminding them of their past failures, and they don't make it. But these students represent a minority. Given an opportunity, most young people will choose hope rather than despair. About 90 percent of those who are accepted make it through the program, and 80 percent of those who make it go on to finish high school.

Brosnan does not paint a rosy picture of the school. The first year was chaotic, with future funding uncertain, teachers' political and pedagogical credos conflicting, and multiple crises arising from unexpected circumstances. But then something happens, even as chaos rules. Some students succeed; teachers begin to realize they don't have to have the same political views to form and work as a team; funding is renewed for the following year.

Yet, as vivid as the depiction of these extraordinary teachers and students is, the merit of the book lies beyond the description of the Urban Collaborative. It is about the social, economic, cultural, and political context that makes it necessary for the Urban Collaborative to exist in the first place. It is about the shameful conditions in which urban children in the United States grow up, sometimes separated from middle class peers (and their usually better schools) only by a city block, a bus

station, or a short car ride. It is about the invisible divisions that society (and all of us) accept by looking away, ignoring the shocking differences in school funding, the daily violence to which those children (our collective children) are exposed, and the lack of care from the larger community.

Against the Current will appeal to educators, parents, and corporate and community leaders who are concerned about the plight of at-risk students living in urban and depressed areas. Brosnan's vivid descriptions capture the daily life and struggle of students and teachers at the Urban Collaborative.

Readers who have experienced the difficulties of growing up in a similar environment will identify with the students. For the most part, they are capable of intellectual accomplishments but are caught in a cycle of financial and intellectual poverty, where education has no connection to their future, where the future may only mean tomorrow or, in some cases, nothing.

Other readers, who have had the privilege of growing up in a mainstream environment, will be challenged to examine social reality from a very different angle. For them, *Against the Current* will be an eye-opener, not only in terms of understanding these particular teenagers, but in discovering the collective responsibility we all have toward at-risk children.

Above all, however, the Urban Collaborative is a success story. At a time when public elementary and

secondary education in the United States still represents a source of uneasiness, if not anxiety, among most Americans, Michael Brosnan's book tells us the Urban Collaborative is able to turn around most of its students, who would otherwise have dropped out of the education system. Hope exists, even where we would

not expect to see it; if one man like Rob DeBlois can make such a positive impact on so many at-risk students, imagine all the miracles we could create together. ~B

Reviewed by Rosa Aronson, associate director of corporate partnerships and development at NASSP.

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. Eugenia Cooper Potter, Editor.