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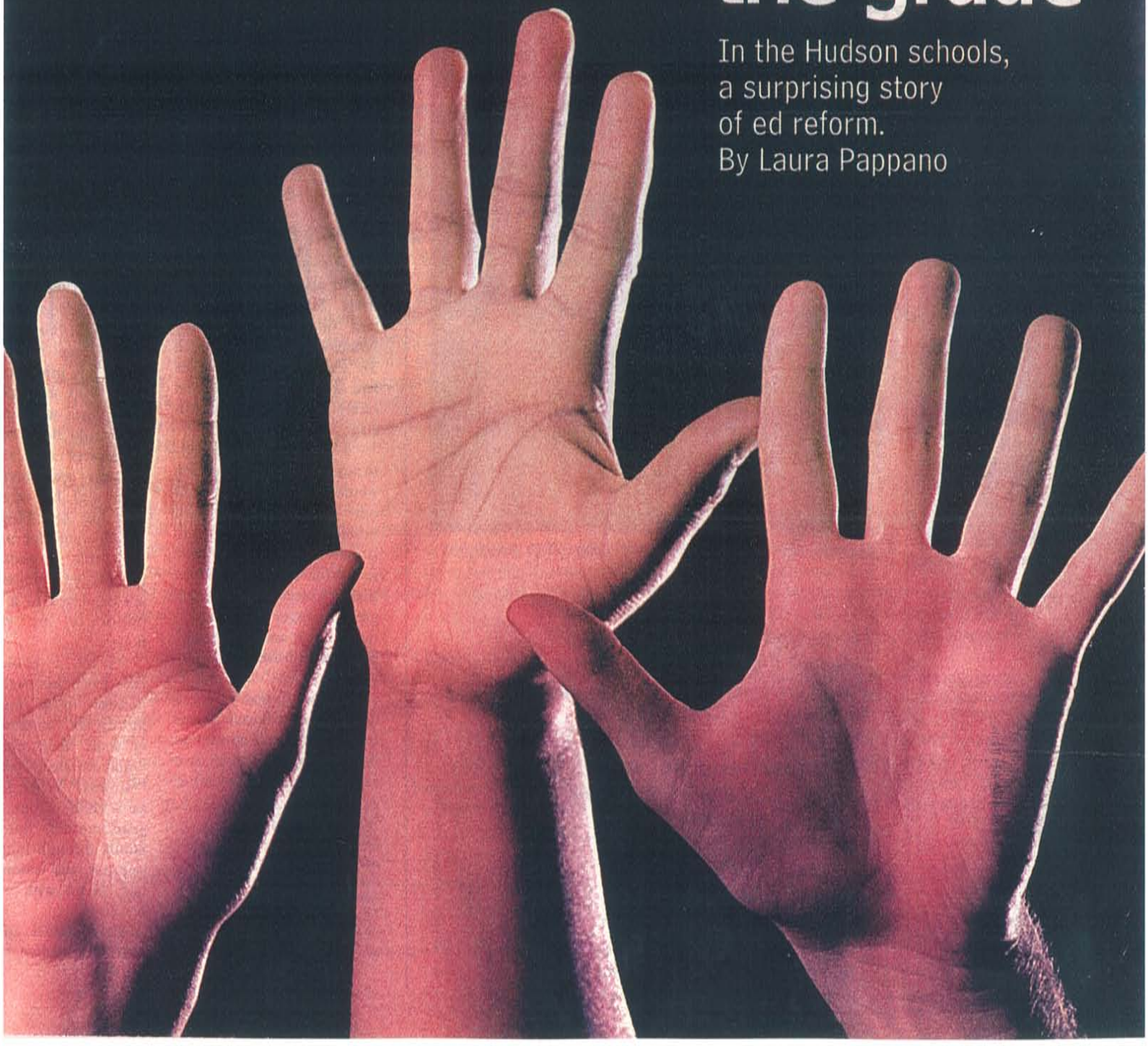
The Boston Globe Magazine

APRIL 21, 2002

Making the grade

In the Hudson schools, a surprising story of ed reform.
By Laura Pappano



The Boston Globe Magazine

APRIL 21, 2002

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Making the grade 10

In Hudson, they don't "teach to the test," and Superintendent Sheldon Berman is the reason why. His innovative and determined style has pushed a middling school system to excel.

By Laura Pappano

Lane Turner / The Boston Globe

Superintendent Berman talking to a Hudson High School class.

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Lifestyle lessons

THE JUXTAPOSITION of two articles in the March 10 *Globe Magazine* was startling. The first, about Jim and Mary Kate Dillon, two selfless people who are attempting to repair the world in their own way, was inspiring ("A Family in Full"). Then, to turn a page or two and see the closets of other Bostonians ("Behind Clothes Doors") made me wonder: How many coats, dresses, and Hermes bags could the Dillons have if they had not decided to adopt three children with special needs and devote their young lives to them? And who is richer?

ANITA GARLICK
Brookline

Character and class

IT WAS REFRESHING TO read about professor Patricia Silver's experiences and observations ("Coal Miner's Daughter," March 3). Eric Goldscheider has laid light upon an issue that rarely if ever is discussed: class and elitism.

I wonder why our politicians and business leaders would have us believe that our most serious social problems are crime and racism. While we still have room for improvement on these issues, there is no greater danger to our nation than elitism and the inequities that it creates and nurtures.

Elitism fosters the sense of entitlement that is prevalent in academia as well as in politics, business, and religion: Enron; the Catholic Church and how it has handled the recent scandals; business leaders rewarded with lucrative payouts as rank-and-file workers are awarded pink slips.

We talk about honor, duty, hard work, sacrifice, patriotism, and community. Funny how it is usually only the "little people" who adopt these ideals as cornerstones of their lives. They don't talk about it – they practice it.

Our nation was built on the backs of men such as Silver's father and the majority of the people in this country: hard-working and selfless. The only weapons that can combat elitism are education, understanding, and outrage. So get outrageous!

GLEN MUNROE
Leominster

I AM STRUCK BY HOW closely I can identify with Patricia Silver and her family history. She and I are of similar age and achievement. My grandfather, like hers, went to work in the coal mines when he was a child. Like her, I remember stories of the accidents, sickness, and poverty that went with his way of life. And like her, I revere my grandparents for what they were able to endure. My grandfather's union badges are displayed in a place of honor in my mother's house.

What I could never take from this background, however, is an impulse to glorify the "working class" or some fuzzy notion that "intellectualism" is about "fairness." When I learned, as a child, about how my grandmother nursed her family through injuries and sickness, the lesson I drew had to do with character, not class.

My mother and father were able to live far better

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"It is very hard not to simply do [MCAS] test prep and return to a kind of instruction that is very dated," says Sheldon Berman. "I've been the buffer here. If we do the right things for kids, scores will go up."

In Hudson, they don't "teach to the test," and Superintendent Sheldon Berman is the reason why. His innovative and determined style has pushed a middling school system to excel.

Making the grade

Hudson hits you like a folk song, the type of ordinary place a balladeer could revel in. An old mill town perennially on the cusp of reinventing itself, Hudson is where computer giant Intel manufactures Pentium IVs and has its state of the art research and development center, and where the Hudson Lock factory operates out of a 19th-century building.

Hudson has two Dunkin' Donuts and no Starbucks. It's a place you might slip into a mental slot labeled "aging industrial town." Spotting the tired brick building with its shifting asphalt parking lot that houses the headquarters for the Hudson Public Schools, you might think you know the been-here-forever administrators, the struggling-to-catch-up teaching, the behind-the-curve academic world it represents.

But there you would be mistaken. Hudson's schools are, in fact, on the cutting edge. That doesn't mean that Hudson High School has become a Harvard feeder or that when students sit down this month and next to take the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests they will earn scores ranking the 2,800-student system among elite districts in the state. Such results, after all, reflect a community's socioeconomic status as much as any learning agenda.

What the Hudson schools are doing is, in a way, far more impressive and certainly more relevant in this era of school reform: They are remaking themselves

BY LAURA PAPPANO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANE TURNER / THE BOSTON GLOBE

The president of the teachers' union says that Berman has made Hudson's schools "proactive instead of reactive. We're advancing, we're constantly moving. We're not waiting for something to happen."

from a school system rooted in mediocrity into a center of innovation. Hudson, located 28 miles west of Boston, has become a magnet for creative, high-energy teachers. The town's schools teach ethics and embrace character-building values as part of the mission, not as an afterthought. And, most important, educators in Hudson understand that their job is not just to teach but to make sure all students – even those who speak little or no English or suffer from severe learning disabilities – learn.

In Hudson, there is a can-do attitude. If something is not working, educators are expected to come up with something better, not complain that the kids are the problem or that this is the way it's always been. Mass Insight, a nonprofit education research firm, last year named Hudson High one of 10 model "Vanguard Schools" in the state. The Virtual High School was launched six years ago at Hudson High and has spread across the United States. The online network lets 197 schools and 2,261 US students take courses on the Internet. Last fall, the Virtual High School won a prestigious international Stockholm Challenge Award. The district's four elementary schools have won state awards for service learning, combining class lessons with efforts benefiting the community. And the district earned one of nine 2001 National Schools of Character awards from the Character Education Partnership, based in Washington, D.C.

The Hudson schools have also seen test scores rise. Fourth- and eighth-grade MCAS results are consistently at or just above the state average, a striking improvement from 1988, when, for example, eighth-grade Massachusetts Educational Assessment Program scores had Hudson ranked 19th out of 19 nearby communities. Fourth-graders that year were second from the bottom in the same assessment. Such scores were typical in the mid-1990s. The high school's MCAS results have also improved. In the *Globe*'s ranking of 2000 MCAS scores, Hudson ranked 54th of 320 state high schools, up from 146th of 308 in 1998. Although that ranking dipped last year, the district's mean combined SAT scores rose 64 points, from 983 to 1,047.

But perhaps most critical is that people in Hudson now see the schools as a jewel. Joan Jameson, who has lived in Hudson all of her life and has sold real estate since 1975, says the schools have become a potent selling point, especially to professionals buying new homes priced from $350,000 to $500,000.

A decade ago, says Sarah Cressy, a fourth-grade parent and president of the Assabet Valley Chamber of Commerce, the schools were considered "average." "Now," she says, "people are very pleased to be sending their children to the Hudson Public Schools."

The Hudson schools are evidence that education reform can work. But they also raise a troubling question: Is their success too dependent on one person?

Laura Pappano writes a weekly education column for the Globe *called "The Chalkboard."*

YOU DON'T GET FAR INTO A DISCUSSION ABOUT EDUCATION IN Hudson without hearing about "Shelley," that is, Sheldon Berman, superintendent of schools. The 5-foot-5-inch son of a factory worker and a bookkeeper from Chicago who graduated from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1971, Berman comes across a little like musician Paul Simon: soft-spoken but passionate, even poetic, about his beliefs. Berman, 53, is a self-described "night person" who will e-mail you at 11 p.m. on a Sunday but doesn't "do caffeine."

Married to a classmate from graduate school, he's a father of three boys (one has Down syndrome) who lives in Concord, jogs when he can, and makes pancakes for breakfast. He's a leader who hungers – some say too much – for consensus. Though he spent just six years in the classroom and never worked as a school administrator before taking the $126,000-a-year superintendent's job in 1993, the buzz among school employees is that they're "lucky Shelley picked Hudson." In most ways, they're right.

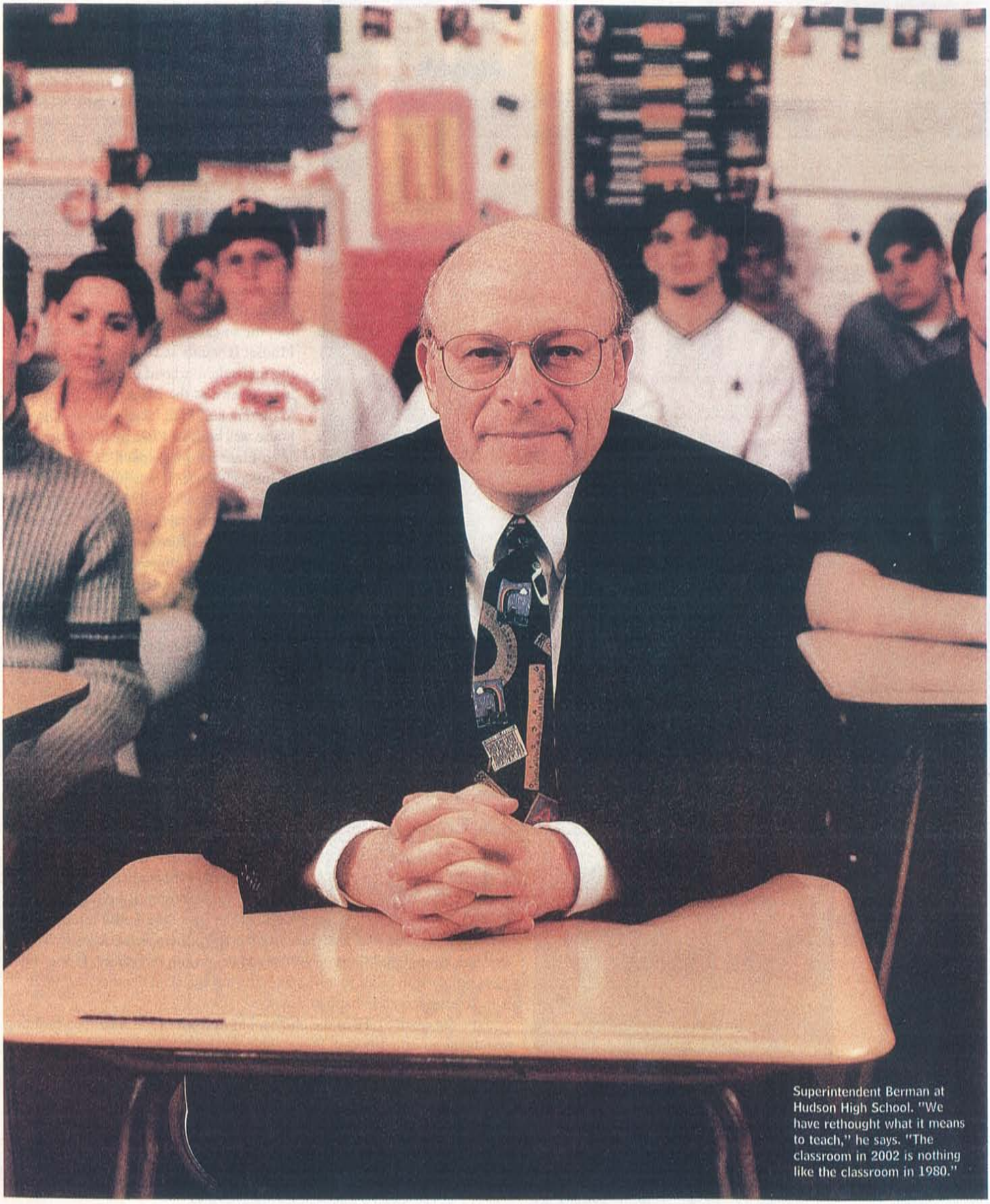
Berman has a doctorate in education from Harvard and a national profile with character education advocates who support weaving ethics and morality into school. He's written one book on children's social consciousness, coauthored another, contributed chapters to other books, and regularly publishes articles in education journals on subjects from math reform to virtual learning. He heads organizations, sits on boards, and cranks out studies. Berman has just earned the National Science Education Leadership Association 2002 Administrator's Award. He's also a dedicated grant writer who last year brought $1.25 million into his district.

"The one thing most people would agree with is that Shelley has come in and definitely made a difference," says Michael Nanartowich, director of the new alternative education program at the high school, Strive-Plus, and president of the teachers' union. "He has changed the vision of a lot of people out there: that Hudson Public Schools are proactive instead of reactive. We're advancing, we're constantly moving. We're not waiting for something to happen. Shelley's vision has always been to try something different; don't always stick with what's there."

George Luoto, who chaired the School Committee during the search for a superintendent, says hiring Berman "was probably the best thing I did serving 12 years on the school board." In other ways, though, Berman is lucky Hudson was there to be picked.

It just so happened that in 1993 – at the same time that the state's Education Reform Act became law – Hudson needed a superintendent. After a decade thinking about education from the lofty perch of the Cambridge nonprofit group Educators for Social Responsibility, Berman wanted to dig in and see what he could do.

The education reform law aimed to address the wild disparity between schools in poor and rich communities in Massachusetts by diminishing the link between school funding and local property taxes and by instituting statewide standards. While *Continued on Page 15*



Superintendent Berman at Hudson High School. "We have rethought what it means to teach," he says. "The classroom in 2002 is nothing like the classroom in 1980."

Making the grade

Continued from Page 12

serious gaps remain, the differences between rich and poor are not as stark as they were nine years ago. Education reform also sought to raise the quality of education for all students. This has been more challenging.

What caught Berman's attention was that at the same moment that the Education Reform Act passed, a burgeoning body of research pointed to a consensus on how children can best learn. It was a chance for real change.

"Many superintendents and teachers across the state in 1993 felt they were working at an inspired moment," says Berman, sitting in an office cluttered with knick-knacks, including a photograph of him with Bill Clinton. "We have rethought what it means to teach. The classroom in 2002 is nothing like the classroom in 1980."

Berman came to Hudson because he wanted to be part of the game and to work in a district where it would matter. "In wealthier areas, the parents do a great deal to advance learning," he observes. "If you can do education well here, it can make a difference for kids."

That is one of the great charges of education reform: To ensure that children everywhere – not just in wealthy districts – do get a good education. But it is also one of the nagging problems. Money alone won't create change. Less affluent districts need leaders who can translate the mandate of education reform into a tailor-made plan.

Education reform has yielded fat binders of detailed state frameworks that seem like guidebooks to remaking schools, but many districts are still searching for the right formula for success. The state has

named the results it wants, but how to get there?

Barbara Neufeld, president of Education Matters Inc., a nonprofit firm in Cambridge that is working to improve urban schools, says potential leaders within districts need to be identified and trained. "We waste an inordinate amount of talent in school districts by not providing people who might have the potential" to lead, Neufeld says. "My hope is that we can help people become the kind of leaders who can lead this reform."

Well-heeled districts have an abundance of leaders, people who were looking at research and tweaking the system long before education reform. In poorer districts, reform has been a wake-up call for schools accustomed to complete autonomy. As one urban middle school principal says: "Now we know what to teach. Before, if you liked dinosaurs, you taught dinosaurs. If you liked long division, you taught long division."

> "My belief," says Sheldon Berman, "is that the way you develop effective citizens is to have them become citizens of their school."

Hudson offered an energetic visionary like Berman a chance to put theory into practice. Budget cuts had forced the district to cancel standardized testing. There was no curriculum coordination. Students from the four elementary schools were taught so differently, says School Committee member Barbara Rose, "that the first year in middle school was spent bringing everyone together."

School Committee

chairman Tom Green says that when Berman reinstated national standardized testing, the system discovered, for example, that elementary students did poorly on fractions. The problem? "The third-grade teachers thought the fourth-grade teachers were doing it," Green says, "and the fourth-grade teachers thought the third-grade teachers were doing it."

And in another blow that Superintendent Berman would have to face, the advent of school choice in 1991 had parents voting with their feet. From 1993 to 1997, more students were transferring out of the district than coming in – with big financial consequences, because money follows the student. In the 1995-1996 school year, for example, 68 students transferred into Hudson, but 103 transferred out, for a net loss of $210,205. There was no doubt: Berman had a challenge he could relish.

THE CHALLENGE WAS – and is – not just about fixing obvious problems, like poor communication between teachers about what they're teaching. Really making change calls for understanding what children need to learn. And it's not the same for every child.

You have only to drop into the Hudson High cafeteria at lunch to see the scope of the assignment that schools face. Meet Rodrigo Souza, 20, a sophomore, new to the school and new to America. He arrived, alone, last July from Brazil and lives with four friends in a rented house in Framingham. He works 40 hours a week – as a busboy at Vinny Testa's and as a waiter in the dining room of a nursing home. When Souza slides into his seat at a cafeteria table with a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, he has company. Students call it "the Brazilian table," and you can hear earnest-

eyed kids joking in a mix of Portuguese and English.

Souza, a polite young man who wears a gold chain around his neck, represents just one facet of the educational charge given Berman and school officials across the state: teaching the stunning range of students now populating their classrooms.

Today there are large numbers of children with language barriers, learning problems, and social issues from poverty to domestic abuse. In one Lynn elementary school, half of the student population transfers in and out in the course of a year because the school is host to children from nearby homeless shelters. There are also more children with special needs – statewide, the number has jumped from 9,327 students in 1982 to more than 160,000 in 2000, the latest year for which figures are available. There are also more students statewide like Souza, for whom English is a foreign language, with the number struggling with English more than doubling to nearly 45,000 students between 1982 and 2000.

At Hudson High School, 12 percent of the students don't speak English as a first language. At almost every cafeteria table are a range of students who each need something different. There are average students who need a nudge. Kids who click with computers but struggle with writing. There are star figure skaters who need to leave school by noon to get to the rink for practice but still want to graduate on time. There are also top students like Domenic Albino, a ruddy-faced 16-year-old with curly hair. He scored an impressive 1,580 on his SATs and is taking advanced placement calculus as a sophomore, which presents a challenge to the school: What math will he take next year? And it's not just him. There are 23 students who will complete the school's math offerings in June and still have a year or more before graduation. What should they do?

Education reform demands that schools educate everyone. All students – not just those at the top – are expected to perform well. A decade ago, the goal for struggling students was progress, not victory. Now, because Souza is younger than 21, Hudson High is helping him pass his MCAS test to get a diploma, even though he cannot speak fluent English.

"Reform is a major cultural change. In schools where heretofore performance didn't much matter, now performance counts. Trying hard is not enough; you actually have to accomplish something," says Paul Reville, chairman of the Massachusetts Education

Reform Review Committee and executive director of the Pew Forum on Standards-Based Reform at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "The goal of education reform is extremely ambitious: the notion that we can get all students irrespective of their backgrounds and challenges to meet the same standard."

In the past, says Reville, "we were only getting a few students to the kinds of levels we are now expecting all students to be at."

The standard Reville speaks about is measured by the MCAS, statewide standardized tests aimed at ensuring that all students learn enough to earn passing scores. As of this year, all students must pass the English and math MCAS to graduate from high school. Because doing well on the tests is critical, boosting MCAS scores – not necessarily improving teaching – has become a goal in some school districts.

While education experts praise Hudson as "data driven" and the district's MCAS results have improved, Berman refuses to let scores run schools. He believes in testing and also uses the TerraNova achievement tests, which show Hudson consistently scoring around the 75th percentile nationally, to gauge student progress.

Berman says the MCAS has potential but needs refinement. Last year, for example, the fourth-grade English test was changed because only three children in the state scored in the top two tiers of the advanced category, while 1,776 earned such scores in math and 221 in science and technology. Berman says there were about 100 errors in Hudson's 2001 MCAS scores. The state also doesn't indicate the reporting reliability of test data or describe what point total reflects a meaningful change, he argues. Yet, MCAS is central to judging school performance. Chronically underperforming schools are subject to state takeover.

"We are now facing such extraordinary pressure around accountability, it is very

Today's solution

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hard not to simply do [MCAS] test prep and return to a kind of instruction that is very dated," he says. "I've been the buffer here. If we do the right things for kids, scores will go up."

SO WHAT HAS SHELley Berman done? And how has he done it?

The striking thing about Berman's vision is its breadth. There may be weak spots, like the foreign language program at the middle school, but whether you talk with teachers at the kindergarten center or look at elementary, middle, or high school levels, Berman has left his mark.

For example, he's partnered with computer giant Intel, which has committed $600,000 to technology at the high school. Sit in classrooms, and you see the support: computers with labels that say "Donated by Intel." Intel helped revamp the fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-grade math and science programs, donating $75,000 for curriculum and teacher training. Rob Richardson, Intel's East Coast education program manager, says that, as a district, Hudson "tends to stand out, partially because of the number of teachers and administrators involved with continuous improvement and professional development." Intel is one example; there are other partnerships or grants launching innovative K-12 programs, from writers' workshops to the Virtual High School.

The schools are always reinventing themselves. In five years, Hudson High School has added three new advanced placement courses and more than doubled student enrollment, from 75 to 163. Three Hudson High students are enrolled in classes at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, and every Thursday evening, high school principal John Stapelfeld drives a student to Cambridge to attend a Harvard Extension

School class in metaphysics, because the high school doesn't offer it. It's not the first time he's done that; last year he drove three students. And all of those kids who were leaving for other districts? Five years ago, the tide turned. This school year, only 24 transferred out while 91 transferred in, the maximum the district could take.

But the most dynamic piece of Berman's game plan is the excitement he's built among teachers and administrators. People want to work at his schools. Forest Avenue Elementary School principal Joanne Collins was hired two years ago but has been reading Berman's writing on education since 1990. Kathy Brown, Hudson's director of secondary math and science, was the Department of Education's statewide science coordinator before coming to Hudson four years ago. High school guidance counselor David Champigny had practically accepted a job elsewhere when he kept an interview appointment in Hudson, a town he'd never heard of. After meeting Berman and Stapelfeld, he signed on.

"I had already decided I was retiring," says Phyllis Kutt, who was teaching at the private Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge when she got a call two years ago asking if she'd apply for a job team-teaching American studies with Brian Daniels. Daniels, a Mike Doonesbury lookalike, came to Hudson three years ago after 21 years in Catholic schools. Today the pair talk about teaching in dynamic terms.

"I don't want to sound like a cheerleader, because I'm not," says Daniels, who also teaches a popular ethics course. "When that door closes, we own this room. When the coordinator comes in and sits, she becomes part of our classroom, as opposed to our classroom [doing] tricks for her."

The easy banter that teacher June Murray has with students explains the reputation she's earned for offering two of the hottest courses in the high school: world cultures Latin America and world cultures Asia. What's striking is that in an era when schools are instituting courses aimed at improving test scores, Murray created these broad-ranging courses that explore religion and culture because she, Stapelfeld, and Berman thought they would be interesting. Not only does she teach to students of all ability levels, but she teaches the courses full time. The goal is stimulating learning, not better MCAS performance.

"My friends who are in education think it's hysterical that I got to, like, make up a class," Murray says. "I love what I'm able to do as a teacher. I feel really, really lucky."

In some ways, Berman

has done what Bill Belichick did for the New England Patriots: He took an ordinary group of players, fostered team spirit, and put together a great game plan. But rather than stressing defense, Berman is an offensive coordinator. Like Belichick, he doesn't do it alone. Berman has the vision but surrounds himself with people who make the plays happen. Among the moves that have won the most outside praise is the reform of Hudson High School.

ON A WEDNESDAY IN early November, Shelley Berman is the one whom architects, school officials, and budget types wait on as they gather at a small table to study plans for the new $43 million high school, whose steel skeleton is already rising behind the existing school. It will open next January.

The high school has been Berman's most visible laboratory. In its report on the state's schools, Mass Insight observed that Berman and associates "have transformed Hudson High from a quietly underperforming school into a model of educational reform." Andrew Calkins of Mass Insight says high schools typically are the last to get attention in reform efforts.

Some of the reform celebrated now at Hudson High School – particularly the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum – arose from a practical problem. When Berman arrived, financial troubles had forced the high school to eliminate the positions of all of the department heads. Rather than restore the old hierarchy when finances improved, Berman created posts for two interdisciplinary leaders at the high school, one to oversee math and science and the other to focus on English and social studies. Today, American studies classes, for example,

have two teachers in the room, one for history and one for literature, allowing students to see relationships between the subjects.

The problem at the November meeting is – no surprise – money. How to trim dollars from a building under construction. Berman doesn't speak much, but when he does, he's not offering a suggestion but making a demand, even if it doesn't quite sound that way. He reminds colleagues to inventory what's already in the school.

"If we can take $100,000 of equipment out of here, that would be a viable savings," he says amid a debate about copy machines. And why, he asks, is the track surface now $90,000 more than before? Berman's prodding yielded results: Administrators inventoried equipment and also found a company to do the track for $90,000 less.

Hudson High principal Stapelfeld, a wiry gray-haired man who watches incoming test scores like a bookie trying to figure odds, is among Berman's inner circle. While Berman has brought staff and teachers to Hudson who reflect his beliefs, Stapelfeld is a 1965 Hudson High School graduate who has been principal since 1979. Still, there is a good relationship between the old-timer and the newcomer. In fact, Stapelfeld seems to love this reform stuff. Recently, he found a solution to the advanced placement calculus problem: Get a Holy Cross math professor to teach advanced calculus at the high school. Stapelfeld, who describes Berman as "a great change agent," says colleagues in other districts are amazed at what he and Berman can do. This is evident in the creation of courses, including Daniels's one on ethics.

"That is something he and I talked about, and, bingo, it happened," says Stapelfeld. "In some systems that would be a political football."

> Berman's plan has built excitement among teachers and administrators. People want to work at his schools.

Not everyone in town or in the system agrees with Berman, personally or professionally. But people tread carefully: No one wants to be on record opposing what has been an educational boon for the town. Yet, one thing you notice in Hudson is that Berman and his team have a freedom that could never exist in many communities. The School Committee isn't breathing down his neck but instead is marveling at his changes. Still, Stapelfeld sees that leeway tied to Berman's designs. He can disagree, but Berman wins.

"There are times when Shelley's ideas and my ideas don't run in the same vein," he says. "He'll give me a chance to talk, and then he tells me how it will be." Berman's style, Stapelfeld says, "is to present the idea and work with you until you accept that idea."

There's a blueprint for the new high school on Berman's office wall. It's his baby, the tangible product of a vision. At the heart of the design are five clusters that break the grade eight-through-12 high school – a configuration he inherited and has come to like – into intimate units. This may look like the familiar "houses" that schools use to subdivide their population, but this plan features a 2,400-square-foot space in each cluster for weekly student governance meetings to debate issues such as the dress code and attendance policy.

"In schools, we do a lot of moralizing to kids about what's right," says Berman. "My belief is that the way you develop effective citizens is to have them become citizens of their school. They learn negotiating skills, effective speaking skills."

Last year, this concept got a trial run during two whole-school meetings. In one, students showed a frank video they had made about a sensitive subject – friction between immigrant and American students – followed by discussions. In the second, students aired concerns about cafeteria food. Some felt Berman didn't take seriously their proposal for an outside food service company to run the cafeteria. "He can be close-minded," says Phil Benevides, 17, a junior who last year served as a student governance facilitator. But Berman offers a letter from

the food service outlining its response to student complaints.

While there's much excitement about clusters, Berman's plan to organize by areas of interest – science, health, and the environment; business, engineering, and technology; communication and the arts; social policy, education, and social service – is opposed by some teachers who want heterogeneous clusters.

"I am a huge advocate of clustering," says Murray, the world cultures teacher, but "I don't think it should be along career pathways." Some teachers feel they've been listened to but not heard. But such grumblings are minor for a system that has undergone as much change as Hudson. That is partly numbers: Sixty-five percent of teachers at the high school and more than half across the district were hired by Berman.

There is no doubt that Berman is leading an education revolution in Hudson. Even those who spar with him give him credit. Paul Blazar, the town's executive assistant, says Berman "has been the driving force" behind school improvement. "That's not to say ed reform has hurt" the effort, he says. "But I don't think anybody thinks that is the primary reason for the change."

Is it all Berman? Or is education reform letting Berman shine? Outsiders like Reville of Harvard and Calkins of Mass Insight see Berman as the very model of a modern superintendent embracing reform. It may not matter to Hudson whether Berman is leading or following, but it does matter to the notion of education reform as a vehicle to improve all schools. If Shelley Berman is a poster boy for education reform, the question arises: Can other districts do it without him – or someone like him? ▭