

Left behind: The education challenge

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

A week or so after President Bush assured the nation that education would continue to be one of his top priorities and that no child would be left behind, I had an extended conversation with the principal of an elementary school in the middle of Cabrini-Green. Cabrini is the housing project on the near north side of Chicago. Constructed in the '60s, Cabrini once housed 20,000 people. It became the symbol of everything that was misguided about public housing. It was the scene of concentrated poverty, poorly maintained buildings, unemployment, family disintegration, crime and drugs. When you take a taxi from the north side to O'Hare, the driver asks, "Division Street?" That means: "Are you willing to risk driving through Cabrini-Green?"

Many of the project's worst buildings have been torn down, and others are scheduled to come down. Some of the schools that served the project are also being replaced.

Byrd Academy is a building with about as much character as the communist-era structures of Eastern Europe. John Updike says somewhere that the old ornate school buildings which many of us attended as children reflected the community's pride, its commitment to its children, and the high premium it placed on education. I remember the high school in Altoona, Pennsylvania, with its dome visible from all over the town, and its wonderful three-story open light well. You knew when you entered the school that important activities happened inside and that the community had high expectations for you.

Byrd Academy looks like a bureaucracy's afterthought. The school has no gymnasium, no assembly area, no lunch room. Children play outside when the weather permits and eat lunch in the hallway. These kids from Cabrini and the ones who preceded them over the past four decades have already been left behind in many ways. If President Bush is serious, we have some real catching up to do.

There is a lot about Byrd Academy that is discouraging. Yet the more I talked with the principal and toured his school, the more inspired I became. In fact, Joe Gardner

is my new hero, along with everyone who teaches at his school. Their commitment is palpable. Their devotion to teaching is obvious. Their love for the students is clear.

The last thing Joe Gardner showed me was a mural painted by a group of mentally challenged students. They had been asked to imagine what their neighborhood and school ought to look like. Outside the school, amid the decaying high-rise buildings, the trash was blowing about, the streets were full of potholes, and fire trucks and ambulances were regularly roaring by. But on the wall the students drew recognizable Chicago landmarks—the John Hancock Building and the Sears Towers—surrounded by lots of trees, flowers, birds, a few computers and a huge yellow butterfly.

If you want to know how far we must travel as a nation to bring all the children along, make an appointment with the principal of an urban school in a poor neighborhood. My guess is that you will be troubled but also inspired.