

## Portraits

# Portrait of Dennis Littky

Known as "Doc" to his students, as a troublemaker to his critics, as good copy for journalists, and as a dedicated professional to his staunch supporters, Dennis Littky is guided by an impassioned desire to improve education, regardless of the personal risks involved.

Photograph by Edmund W. Bill, Jr.



In September 1986, Dennis Littky appeared on the cover of *New England Monthly*—leaning on a chair, smiling impishly, energetic eyes gazing through his trademark wire-rim glasses, his full, reddish, slightly graying beard brushing his chest. The caption? "He's the Best Educator in New England. And He's Just Been Fired."

From 1985 to 1987, the Winchester, New Hampshire, Board of Education tried to fire their high school principal. The board neither understood how much Littky had come to love their "poor town that's been kicked around a lot" nor just how hard he could fight. However, 18 months after he had been "fired," there was a new pro-Littky board in power, one former board member had left town, Littky himself had been featured everywhere from *Newsweek* to the "West 57th Street" television show—and his love affair with Winchester continued in full bloom.

But before we go any further, let's go back in time a bit to trace Littky's journey from a middle-class home in Michigan to his career as a maverick in the education field.

## **"My philosophy was that if a kid was thrown out of class, it wasn't necessarily the kid's fault."**

### **The Awakening of a Maverick**

The son of a podiatrist and a feisty housewife, Dennis Littky grew up in Detroit. He describes his life as "very ordinary" until well into his undergraduate years. As a student, he was uninspired but able until his junior year at the University of Michigan, when he enrolled in "The Dynamics of Mental Illness." For the first time, Dennis "really got moved." He became absorbed in studying about children, mental illness, and education.

Later, in a graduate program that combined education and psychology, he was able to explore his long-held belief "that education wasn't done right." An iconoclastic teaching assistant at the university, he received a Distinguished Teaching Fellow Award for his classroom work. Soon education and teacher training began to attract him more than clinical psychology. Whenever he worked at or visited other universities, he was disheartened to see how poor the trainers of teachers were:

The people in college teaching are people who are right out of college with PhD's and don't know a whole lot about schools, or they're people who had been in schools a long time, and thank God they're out.

In 1968 Dennis accepted his first job in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn during the "school wars." It was "very exciting because it was what was happening in education," he remembers. "Everybody was looking at Ocean Hill-Brownsville as an example for the country." It was here that Littky learned to fight. It was also here that he drew close to the only person he will admit to hero-worshipping, Rhody McCoy. McCoy, the district superintendent, was determined to make life better for black students, for all New York students, and for education in general. Littky remembers McCoy as a great leader with vision, who "refused to compromise and wasn't afraid to die for what he was doing... and he worked like a maniac." Eighteen years later, virtually the same words would be said about Dennis Littky in Winchester.

### **Building a Better Middle School**

After Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Littky worked on a model teacher-training project at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He soon began to chafe, however, when he realized he had no real influence over what happened in schools. For instance, after he and his team had worked hard in one middle school to bring about a rich paperback reading program, the principal took the conservative approach and ordered every teacher to use a basal reader. Recognizing that he "had no power as a university person," Littky applied for and got appointed to the principalship of a new middle school on Long Island. Two years before accepting this job, he had gotten his PhD from the University of Michigan (in education and clinical psychology). He was only 27 years old. Littky set out to build the finest middle school in the country. Shoreham-Wading River was a middle-class community with a history of concern for good education *and* the tax funds from the Shoreham Nuclear Power Station to make educational dreams come true. The community had formerly sent its middle school students to nearby Port Jefferson as tuition students. Now a middle school would be built and a new faculty hired. "I gathered together 23 teachers that first year who were all pretty much superstars in their own schools," reminisced Littky, "It was the first time in my life when I felt *all* my skills were being used."

Dennis worked 80 hours a week, and many of his young teachers worked with him. He generated excitement in the new school by introducing book talks, a working farm, frequent field trips, a community service program, sustained silent reading, a student advisory program, integrated learning, and team teaching. With the enthusiasm, though, came controversy. Some vocal parents who objected to Littky's progressive ideas and programs, his informal dress (a shirt

and chinos), and his allowing students to call him "Doc" pressured the board to dismiss him. However, the board and administration courageously supported him, and Dennis determined he "wasn't going to be run out of town." He and his teachers worked crushing hours, turning the school into an exemplary, award-winning, much-visited place.

### **Time for a Change**

Six years after arriving in Shoreham-Wading River, Littky had tenure, local fame, the beginnings of national recognition, and "the greatest job in the world." But Dennis thrives on challenges and controversy, and in June 1978 he left Shoreham-Wading River. His farewell party, attended by 600 people, was the largest Shoreham-Wading River school-related social function of the 1970s:

All the people who hated me and fought with me were the people who put on the party... That made me very proud because one of my goals was to take education out of the political realm... To see these people praising the school and me at the end was a beautiful circle.

After having been in the spotlight, Dennis looked forward to having some quiet time to explore himself and to shed the image of "wonderful young principal." In his words, he needed to discover that "I wasn't a good person because I was a good principal, but I was a good person, and I happened to do it being a principal."

So Littky went to live in a small, primitive cabin on a mountain in Winchester, New Hampshire, a working-class town of 3,465 people. He soon fell in love with the town, and he grew to understand the nuances of rural poverty and to admire the dignity of the town's residents. Little did he know that within a few years he would be at the center of the loudest, ugliest controversy in modern Winchester.

Much of Littky's first "retirement" year was devoted to fixing his cabin and meeting people, something he does easily. "Middle-class people always ask what you do for a living and put you in a box," he explained. "No one here ever asked, 'What do you do

for a living? So I never told anybody what I did." In his conversations around town, all he "heard was how bad the school was." Never a wall-flower, Dennis soon became active in the PTA, helping "them set up a networking thing ... so that we would do better communication." When he discovered that the *Winchester Star*, founded in 1897, had not been published since 1916, he thought it would be grand for the PTA to resurrect the paper and Dennis became the editor. For Littky, the paper also became "a great way for me to get to know the town." (Eleven years later, the paper, still published by volunteers, is a permanent fixture in Winchester.)

Through the newspaper, the local people began to know who Littky was. For example, he put together a creative array of photos for the front page of an early edition. When Ted Kennedy was running for president, Dennis saw him in nearby Keene and asked if he could photograph the senator reading the *Star*. He made the same request of Chris Ford of the Boston Celtics and "sent film to my buddy who was in China." All three pictures ran on the cover of the *Star*

with the caption, "The word is out."

Littky's brief "retirement" was over. Soon he was doing occasional workshops in education for national organizations, and one thing led to another. He was appointed to a vacant seat on the Winchester Board of Education and then ran successfully for a seat in the state legislature, defeating a Republican incumbent in the year of Reagan's first presidential landslide. Dennis realized he was hooked: "I became more and more committed to the town."

#### Out of "Retirement"

In 1981, when the principalship of Winchester's grades 7-12 Thayer Junior-Senior High School opened up, Littky was ready to return to education. He threw himself into the job with his usual intensity, single-mindedness, and dedication. His challenge? To turn poverty into a virtue, to find every vestige of rural dignity and lower middle-class working values and turn them into energy for a school. At that time, the dropout rate in the school was nearly 20 percent, and only 11 percent of the graduating seniors tried college.

### Doc: The Story of Dennis Littky and His Fight for a Better School

Susan Kammeraad-Campbell  
Chicago:  
Contemporary Books, 1989

Those about to do battle to improve America's schools would do well to read the account of "Doc" Littky and his experiences on the front lines of the fight for innovative, responsive education. The story of his efforts is proof that the better the idea, the greater the resistance to change from those who cling to the status quo—and thus the greater the need to persist in working for the implementation of the idea until it succeeds.

Kammeraad-Campbell gives a factually exhaustive and personal account of Littky's gradual involvement in a small, poor, rural community in New Hampshire, where the local high school is a textbook

example of dropouts, discipline problems, and teacher frustrations.

Littky's creative vision, unorthodox methods, and informal manner metamorphoses the school into a model of success and academic achievement heralded by educators nationwide. Yet these same characteristics serve to polarize the community and antagonize the local school board, who fire him despite the protests of kids and parents. His fight to regain his job provides much insight into the value of persistence, and a graphic illustration of how people can lose sight of the goals and purposes of education when old ways are challenged.

—Reviewed by Lars Kongsbom

My first goal in Winchester was to improve the climate. ... If you had seen the school my first year, I literally had to be in the halls to stop a fight before it got too bad. It was a very out-of-control place. ... The place was physically completely broken down. ... There were holes in the cafeteria, there were 40 forks in the ceiling, there were from one- to two-foot holes in every table. ... The school was dirty, there was a lot of graffiti. I got some kids and a great custodian and worked all summer cleaning it up.

Realizing that the personal touch was the only one that would work, he scheduled every student individually that summer. That, of course, meant a great time commitment—one hour for each of 310 students—but when school opened, he knew every youngster, and they knew him. He also "sat down and talked to every teacher: about their wishes, their dreams, their problems." It was through these conversations, for example, that Littky discovered that both students and teachers disliked study halls. So he restructured the school day to eliminate them, giving students more courses—and it worked. His decision making follows a direct, uncluttered route: "All the solutions," he explained, "all the right things are really the most simple, most obvious stuff, it's almost embarrassing."

Elimination of study halls wasn't Littky's only change at Thayer. He also initiated a student advisory system, got students into apprenticeship programs in town, got both students and teachers involved in formulating rules for the school, and encouraged small-group learning and lots of student talk. Most of the teachers supported Littky, but not everything he did pleased every teacher—especially those who were used to eliminating "trouble-makers" from class.

I spent a lot of time talking to kids. My philosophy was that if a kid was thrown out of class, it wasn't necessarily the kid's fault. The problem was somewhere in the environment. It might be the teacher, it might be the class, it might be the kid. Although teachers might have disliked it at first, I made everyone sit and really talk about it—so it made it harder to just toss a kid out. And in most cases it ... was a misplacement of the kid.

Dennis also reached out to the parents because he knew that "regardless of how good a job I did inside the

school, if the community didn't feel the school was better, it didn't matter." He organized small coffees (for about 10 parents) and held them in the parents' homes, at the local diner, or in the factories where they worked:

I'd go into their homes, make jokes about my beard, let them complain to hear what their concerns were, talk of what I was about, and before I left, made every single parent commit to doing something for the school.

### The Calm Before the Storm

Thayer School began to be noticed, to win awards, to be written about. It received the only Carnegie Foundation Award for integrated learning in the state of New Hampshire. Professor Ted Sizer, Dean of the School of Education at Brown University and author of *Horace's Compromise*, selected it as the first of 10 schools in his "Coalition of Essential Schools." Publications from *Yankee Magazine* to the *Christian Science Monitor* reported positively about what was going on in the school. In addition, Littky and the community ran a conference at which such national figures as Professor Sizer and Eliot Wigginton (of *Foxfire* fame) conducted workshops. But it wasn't enough—or maybe it was too much—and the trouble began.

It started with a few people who managed to control the board. . . . They had an image of who I was, what I liked, what the school was—and they made up much of that. . . . It got way out of hand, an intensity they couldn't stop.

The results were accusations, two board elections, recriminations, and the polarization of the community. Once again, Littky's progressive ideas, his beard, his informal dress and relationships with students got him into difficulty with a minority of the residents—but this time a vocal minority who controlled the board of education. An optimist, Littky was able to find the good side of all this: "It forced people to take a stand. The community ended up, after a long struggle, voting these people out." In the process, perhaps because Littky was well known, an article on the controversy appeared in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. Soon all the media were interested. The *Keene Sentinel* ran news stories for months, as did several other

local papers and New England magazines. Stories appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*. Littky spoke on radio shows. On May 25, 1987, *Newsweek* did a full-page article. At about the same time "West 57th Street" visited the school and ran a piece on national television.

Rumors flew that Littky now wore an earring (not true), that he would soon take another job (he got offers but chose to remain in Winchester), that he would spend a great deal of the community's money on the school (he has increased spending only moderately), and that he would allow a pregnant girl to stay in school (true). In fact, the young woman "did a paper on people's attitudes toward pregnancy, and that was a major thing." She also publicly thanked Littky on "West 57th Street" for supporting her through a difficult time and giving her the opportunity to stay in school and graduate. Almost all of the media stories were pro-Littky. The statistics support him as well. Thayer's dropout rate has fallen from almost 20 percent to 6 percent,

the attendance rate is up sharply, half of the graduates now go to college, and Dennis says, '99 percent have opportunities; they choose what they want to do."

### The Best Place for Now

Littky understands that being a principal with a national reputation in rural New Hampshire is probably the best situation for him right now. His "goal is to be as good as I can be right here where I am." Of course, he's always on the cutting edge, and even he can't be sure exactly where that will lead: "I'm looking to take those next steps and take those risks." He knows there are other Shoreham-Wading Rivers and Winchesters out there. He also understands in a way that is both proud and realistic that "one of the things I do well is help people think about things in different ways, help people believe that they can do anything." □

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