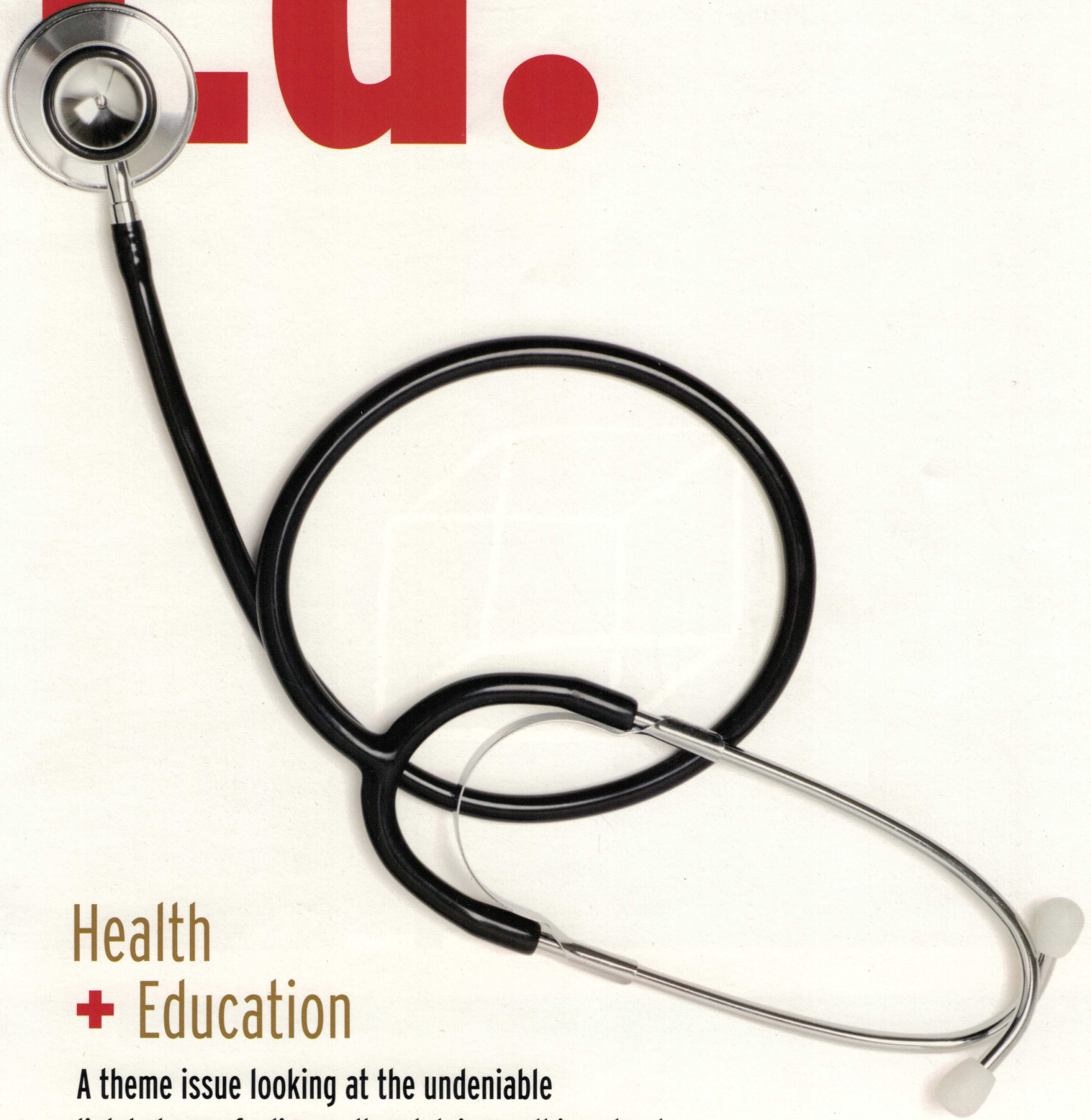


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# Ed.



## Health + Education

A theme issue looking at the undeniable  
link between feeling well and doing well in school.

## PROFILE

Rebecca Mannis, Ed.M.'85

# Making Headway

By Abigail Miekko Vargus

In 1990, Rebecca Mannis, Ed.M.'85, met an unusual client. This young man didn't come to her Manhattan-based consultancy for the usual customized educational planning that takes a bright kid from the Upper East Side to the Ivies. He had leukemia, and he needed someone to help him navigate the school system within the context of his medical condition.

Six years later, she joined in the creation of a new foundation, Making Headway, which focuses on the short- and long-term challenges (educational and otherwise) faced by children with brain or spinal cord tumors. Her experience with the leukemia survivor — and her training in education and neuropsychology — give her special insight into exactly what these students need from their schools and their parents.

"These kids have significant educational issues, even in the best case scenario," Mannis says. "Their nervous system was probably on track in a somewhat different way to begin with." Add surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, or all of the above to an ever-increasing number of missed school days, and these kids have to leap over huge hurdles. "At a time when their classmates are thinking about jump-roping or more homework and fewer dates, these children are dealing with more trauma," she says.

Mannis, who gives a quarter of her time to the foundation at a reduced rate, provides free educational planning and advocacy for these students. For success in the classroom, this guidance can be crucial. "The good news is the kids are surviving and they have caring schools," she says, "but they have unusual experiences that the schools may not have necessarily encountered, so [teachers] also find themselves at a loss for what to do for these children. ... Dealing with the schools, even well-intentioned ones, often can be a traumatizing experience."

To mitigate these frustrations, Making Headway educates the parents and the schools about the particular challenges individual students face — a complicated assessment that varies based on factors such as diagnosis, treatment, and even age at the time of treatment. Some needs are obvious, like providing large print for the visually impaired. But visual impairment can also impact tasks like learning foreign languages (for example, most people change tense-related endings via visual means). Other students



MATTHEW SEPTIMUS

might require funding for an outside school district. Mannis helps schools understand, through partnership rather than adversarial arguments, the need to fund such costly services.

It's a big task, but one that Mannis relishes. "I had always had an interest in two interrelated fields — this field of neuropsychology, and connecting that to educational practice. ... I [wanted to] understand how to help people rather than just how to identify the learning problems. It's always been a professional passion, and it was clear that this was a subpopulation that had significant needs that were underattended."

It's also why she came to the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the first place. She wanted to study with people like Norman Geschwind and Jeanne Chall, and to benefit from "mentorship and the exposure to people who think deeply but also across disciplines" — areas in which she feels the Ed School excels.

But she came away with more than just knowledge. She came away with a zeal and compulsion to do more than think deeply. "One thing that I've told other people is that the notion of always trying to find ways to give back is something that clearly the Ed School is committed to ...," she says. "A sense of professionalism and keeping your eyes open to do something right is something that happens there."

— Abigail Miekko Vargus is a freelance writer and Ed.'s copyeditor.