Uncommon Common Principles

A CES Big Idea by Joseph P. McDonald

By the late 1970s, Ted Sizer was alert to the possibility that Americans might be willing to make serious changes in their high schooling. An alternative high school movement had recently produced new light and fresh models – including the first of New York City's small high schools. And inventive ideas about high schooling were circulating among a widening company of writers and educational adventurers. Ted knew that history has a long arc, but like Martin Luther King, he was never shy about seizing an opportunity to bend it in a good direction. So, in 1979, he invited some colleagues to join him in a research project they called A Study of High Schools. The idea was to examine the institution broadly but intimately, with its history in mind, and with a focus on the experience of students and teachers. Ted himself visited more than 80 schools as part of the study, while his colleagues focused intensely on a set of 15. (Full disclosure: one of these schools was where I was then teaching). The schools were clustered near Denver, San Diego, Boston, northern Ohio, and southern Alabama. But the geographical diversity – and even the important variable of whether a school served an affluent community or a poor one – had little impact on a pattern the researchers found across schools. As Ted would later write in *Horace's Compromise*, "their *commonness* was stunning" (using the word pejoratively here). He meant that the strong resemblance in structure, schedule, even ritual was dispiriting, given the fact that these high schools all served unique kids and communities.

But he was not surprised by the pattern. By then, it was 160 years since the term *high school* had surfaced – at Boston English High School, the first school to offer a stand-alone final four grades. And it was almost 100 years since *high school* (common noun) had begun to eclipse the eclectic forms of high schooling that preceded it, and since the high school *subjects* had become well defined and their impact on the institution's use of time and space largely fixed. By 1980, too, American adults had grown accustomed to thinking of teenagers as a class of humans set apart by adolescent culture, with its inclinations toward goofiness and danger. Many adults thought it better to keep such people stored away

(more or less completely, more or less safely) in a non-reactive standardized container.

The Study of High Schools released its critique of this standardized container in three books published between 1984 and 1986. The first, Ted's own *Horace's Compromise*, emerged at the end of a year full of critical reports on the American high school. The most prominent of the reports came from President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), and was called A Nation at Risk. If government pamphlets were sold, this would have been a best seller. In bellicose language, it claimed that high school reform can save the American economy. And its recommended fixes were the same ones that American manufacturing was then applying: rigorous standards, total quality, and zero tolerance of rejects. The report also promoted the idea that excellence and equity were not incompatible. In both substance and style, it prepared the way for the magical thinking of No Child Left Behind twenty years later: just test it and you'll get it.

Ted Sizer, by contrast, was averse to quick fixes, disinclined to think about schooling as equivalent to a manufacturing process, and for the rest of his life, uncompromising with respect to reductive vision. The sub-title of *Horace's Compromise* is *The Dilemma of the American High School*, and indeed the book invites us from its beginning pages to come to terms with the fact that learning and teaching – things that seem so simple – are actually quite complex. Ted would go on to explore this complexity in three more books, plus two others that he wrote with his wife Nancy Faust Sizer, and one that he wrote with Nancy and his long-time colleague Deborah Meier. All the books focus on teachers and students as agents of reform rather than targets of it. Indeed, agency is a major theme. Teachers must be the agents who *unsettle* formerly settled matters like what's important to learn, how much learning should teachers press for, and how will they know that learning has been achieved; while students must be the agents who actually undertake the learning and implicit unlearning, who track the progress of these in order to fasten them, and who ultimately perform the resulting understanding. A second major theme of the books is that high schools must be intimate enough to cope with this complex and interconnected work. In what follows, I use these themes of agency and intimacy to explore the work and principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Turning away from the business-inspired grand schemes that marked much of American school reform in the last decades of the 20th-century and the first decades of the 21st, the Coalition of Essential Schools – the organization that Ted modeled, as he put it, on a conversation – has advocated bold but small experiments. And it has patiently withstood complaints from the grand-scheme reformers that its thinking isn't big enough, isn't standardized. For bigness and standardization, CES substituted a set of principles. Rescuing a word he had once used to describe a dispiriting pattern of sameness in American high schooling, Ted named them the *Common* Principles. Here he used the word to suggest dialogue among differences, and connections across experiments. I think this usage makes these principles uncommonly common.

Indeed, the history of the ten Common Principles has involved continual dialogue, re-interpretation, and refinement. Taking advantage of this history, I suggest in what follows that the principles may be a good guide for us as we enter what may possibly be a new era in the reform of high schooling, one more inclined than the last toward agency and intimacy. With No Child Left Behind now dispatched – and rather ignominiously at that – and with teachers, parents, and kids fed up with grand schemes and reductive accountability, there is again a kind of new light.

In what follows, I re-reinterpret the Ten Common Principles by this new light, and in the process emphasize the two themes I flagged above – namely agency and intimacy. The first six principles are about agency, and the final four about intimacy.

1. Learning to use your mind well **(Learning to use one's mind well)**
I put this first common principle in the second person in order to announce the first theme, student agency. The principle should sound, I think, like a direct invitation to students, rather than a curriculum goal for teachers. High schooling should involve owning and honing your own mind – and a mind not like the one we have previously emphasized in school. Under this principle, agency is not just intellectual but moral, emotional, and social. All are matters of mind and mindfulness.

One big fan of thinking this way is psychologist Lawrence Steinberg, author of the 2014 book, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*. He argues that high schooling must help adolescents use the

considerable plasticity of their brains (as much plasticity as infants, he says), to expand what they especially need as they approach their 20s – namely, self-regulating experience and skills. Other big fans are Barbara Cervone and Kathleen Cushman, co-authors of the 2015 book, *Belonging and Becoming: The Power of Social and Emotional Learning in High Schools*. In this book, they explore high schools that are doing this now. And then there are Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor who have created a Big Picture composed of many experiments in agency and intimacy.

2. Slack **(Less is more, depth over coverage)**
Formerly known as "less is more," I prefer to re-name this second principle after the essential role in student agency of pause, reflection, and coiling up in order to spring forward. A co-author of mine, Ed Kirby, once pointed out to me that in swimming and rowing, as much depends on one's technique in backing off as in driving on, in lifting up an arm or an oar so as to recover well for the next stroke. Ted argued persuasively that opportunities to exploit slack are missing from the typical high school because it is screwed too tight. So both students and teachers lack the opportunity there to think in the ways that thinking usually happens elsewhere.

3. Universal goals **(Goals apply to all students)**
I use this term for principle three as I remember Ted using it – in order to juxtapose it with principle 4 and so form a paradox – then solve the paradox in principles five and six, and thus complete the first theme. Absent the paradox and the resolution of the paradox, this third principle seems to me an empty aphorism, like "no child left behind."

4. But kids differ **(Personalization)**
Here it is, simply put – no technical sounding words like *personalization* or *differentiation* – just a clause to follow the third principle and, as I say, form a paradox. Ted loved paradox, and found it everywhere in schooling. This one provides the rationale for agency. High schooling needs to empower students to be the agents of their own minds because the vast variability of their minds is necessarily beyond the comprehension of their teachers. And so is the reconciliation of excellence and equity. Teachers can never direct students efficiently toward a universal goal as the pretensions of much policy and "professional development" suggest they can, but what they *can*

do is coach students to get there in their own ways and in their own time. Nancy Sizer recently told me that the word *agency* for Ted arose from the research he conducted for his 1973 book, *Places for Learning, Places for Joy*. "He was looking," she wrote, "for examples of projects over which teenagers might practice the art of finding interests, making plans and decisions, taking a stand, getting things done."

5. Learner and coach **(Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach)**
We used to use another word to start this one off, but it's not a great word to express the agency theme. However, *coach* is still good. Many of us who have survived high school days remember fondly the late afternoon hours, when some of our teachers turned into coaches (not just of athletics, but of drama, media publishing, debate, robotics, art, music, even constitutional law and international relations), and when they gave us a different kind of attention, and when we performed rather than sat and listened or filled out "work sheets."

Most of us could not have imagined, in the year the original Common Principles were written, the technological infrastructure for learning that can theoretically make high school mornings today like high school afternoons. Still, those things we call *courses* and *classrooms* persist. One reason, I think, is that we haven't fully imagined or experienced the coach role yet. The growth in online teaching may help in this regard, as may the rise of digital badging.

6. Badges, blogs, and exhibitions **(Demonstration of mastery)**
High schooling should involve efforts to master a core set of enduring understandings and skills – related especially to further education, career readiness, and civic participation. And it should also involve efforts to hone a small set of individual interests that may blossom over time into major personal achievements. Badging can help in both pursuits.

Speaking in 2007 as the President of the American Educational Research Association, Eva Baker (long-term director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation and Testing at UCLA), became one of the pioneers of the digital badges movement – raising two questions that she called urgent for high schooling: (1) What is the optimal balance between promoting common performance standards, and encouraging students to pursue their interests and talents in some depth? (2) Can high schools do both these things simultaneously? In the same speech, she proposes a skill set that she says

conventional accountability systems can't assess, but that the future nonetheless demands:

- Adaptive problem solving
- Assessing and responding to risk
- Managing distraction and giving mindful attention to tasks
- Working alone, with self-management
- Playing changeable roles in real or virtual teams and groups.

Great list. Thousands of organizations now engage in digital badging, thanks in part to a program funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Instead of spending millions to design and roll out new national standardized tests, why don't we imagine and build a system of validation for this badging?

But valid badges are not all we need to ensure what we used to call "mastery" – but I prefer to call (with an ear for equitable language) competence. People being high schooled also need a means of tracking and sharing performances of still emerging competence with their coaches and critical friends. Here's where blogging – in all media – comes in.

On the other hand, I don't think we should make this crucial process of formative and summative assessment an exclusively online phenomenon. Live performance within a community of peers and coaches and family is also important, and it bridges from the agency theme to the intimacy theme. Reaching back to the early 19th-century academies he had studied and written about in his 1964 book, *The Age of the Academies*, Ted added a new contemporary sense to the word *exhibition*, and it still feels right to my ear.

7. Intimacy and trust **(A tone of decency and trust)**
While the first six principles focus on kids' work as agents of their own learning (with adults functioning as coaches), the last four principles flip the emphasis. They focus on adults' work in creating and maintaining settings that support successful student agency. I like Ted's original language in starting this second chord – a "tone of decency and trust" – because I hear his voice in the phrase. But I changed the first word here in order to signal the start of the new theme, and also for other reasons I suggest below. On the other hand, I've kept the word *trust* – and not least because of the beautiful empirical justification it has recently gained in Anthony Bryk, Penny Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Lupescu & John Q. Easton's *Organizing Schools for Improvement*, one of the

most important pieces of educational research of the early 21st century. These researchers demonstrate in their longitudinal study of Chicago schools that trust among a school's stakeholders (teachers, kids, administrators, parents) is among the essential ingredients in protecting learning gains from the ravages of poverty.

Where does trust come from? In their 1999 book *The Students Are Watching*, Ted and Nancy write that it is "reached through dialogue," a dialogue between the keepers of the school – namely the adults – and their students – as both manage a "careful equilibrium" between a voluntary moral order and autonomy. Intimacy facilitates this dialogue.

Intimacy also lubricates other inevitable conflicts that arise in school. For example, in his (2011) book, *Teaching and its Predicaments*, David Cohen (one of Ted's original partners in the Study of the American High School) writes that great success in teaching depends on great progress in learning, but that great progress in learning can entail massive risk taking. The result, he adds, is that the more teachers demand of students, the more resistance they engender. Teachers who manage to press past this resistance rely on the trust that carefully tended intimacy has built up.

8. Commitment to the entire school **(Commitment to the entire school)**
One of the great achievements of the small high schooling movement – highly associated across the United States with the Coalition of Essential Schools – has been the invention of new forms and norms of collegiality – ones that cut across disciplinary borders, ones that can build and sustain a learning culture across the entire school, ones that can track student growth across learning settings, and not only by means of data but by means of conversation.

9. No more than 10% more **(Resources dedicated to teaching and learning)**
I once thought of this as just a selling point to wary district leaders. But now I see it as the kind of constraint that enhances creativity – like writing with rhyme schemes or designing in code. You can't, for example, just *add on* things as complex as student agency and schooling intimacy. You will likely also have to *toss out* your department structure and your bell schedule.

10. Democracy and equity **(Democracy and equity)**
When I worked at CES, there were only nine common principles. This one was added later. I remember thinking at the time that it seemed redundant – that the

other principles implicitly cover democracy and equity. Now I'm mature enough to understand that it is never enough to *implicitly* promote democracy and equity. The effort needs an explicit focus. As Angela Breidenstein, Kevin Fahey, Carl Glickman, and Frances Hensley put it in their (2012) book of the same name, it is the top level of *Leading for Powerful Learning*. Beyond helping colleagues learn what they need to learn, and manage an ongoing learning culture, this level of leadership helps them go beyond their ordinary frames of mind – the ones that trap us all.

We who care about seizing yet again the opportunity to bend the arc of high school reform in the right direction, especially need this last of the uncommonly common principles in order to understand each other better, and make the conversation Ted started bigger than the sum of our individual contributions.

About the author

Formerly a senior researcher at the Coalition of Essential Schools, Joseph McDonald has been Professor of Teaching and Learning at New York University since 1998. His latest book is *American School Reform: What Works, What Fails, and Why*, winner of the 2015 PROSE Award in Education Practice from the Association of American Publishing. It examines 20 years of school reform in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and the Bay Area.