

HORACE

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Lilly Costa, Managing Editor

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Dear Colleagues and Friends:

The following thoughts on **standards** represent some fragments of a book I am slowly drafting, one dubbed by my friends as *Son of Horace*. Due to space constrictions, I have omitted my portraits of students who exemplify the characteristics discussed. I have shamelessly used my colleagues' ideas and plead to be informed by more: Your reactions are warmly solicited.

STANDARDS

Good high schools are characterized not only by their clear objectives but also by the standards they set. Good schools have faculties which collectively debate standards and ultimately agree to lock arms in trying to meet them. Such debate is difficult, and thus, alas, rarely attempted....

But, a caution: the standards of we teachers and principals are one thing; the kids and *their* standards are another.

The Admirable

There are students whom teachers especially admire. When they graduate from high school, we take great pride in them, and quietly wonder whether we had anything to do with their virtues. When pressed why we respect them so much, we reply with conventional vaguenesses: "He has it all." "She's very mature." "He helps out." "She never gives up."

Sometimes these especially respected kids are not in the graduation ceremony's traditional winners' circle. Their attraction often is their idiosyncrasy, even pushiness. Dutiful and compliant kids tend to win

prizes, and while there is nothing wrong with a sense of duty and good citizenship, too much of these hoary virtues seem to breed superficial sycophancy. Ben Franklin and Jane Addams would not have been big school winners.

We recognize that the virtues these young folk display are complicated by their necessary multiplicity: the truly admirable have talents in necessary combination -- precision of mind, reflectiveness, self-awareness, humility, thoughtfulness, imagination and knowledgeableness. Our admiration arises largely as a result of the *interaction* of such talents. Indeed, an "excellent" high school graduate and a truly admirable citizen of any age are complex beasts.

Once we are clearer on why we so respect any group of admirable kids, we teachers wonder: How much can we take credit for these admired kids' success? Are genes and home and neighborhood all or most of it? Or do schools make some sort of difference? Do they act to reinforce those qualities of excellence that we most admire? Indeed, do schools even bother to identify and to describe them, much less put them foremost? Most of us think not.

Ultimately, we agree that while influences outside of school are the more powerful, those of the school can contribute. We have seen some young folk clearly change for the better from our efforts....

While superficial images of "respected graduates" form the basis for most schools' standards, such "standards" that are particularly articulated usually relate to the

school and not to its students, "input" rather than "output." However, schools are means to ends: the students' fashioned talents are the ends. Goodness, i.e., effectiveness and excellence, of a school can ultimately be not much more than the shadow cast by its graduates. If their school did add value to their lives, it succeeded.

It is upon these graduates' characteristics that a basis for priorities emerges. While these are inescapably complex, they must be made as explicit as possible. Vagueness makes the necessary setting of priorities impossible. Ambiguity of goals prevents all sorts of confrontation. If all conflict can be settled by having every reasonably argued new program simply added to the school's curriculum (with never a deletion), most folk will be content, even if the result is academic superficiality. One can defend this reform-by-addition strategy by worshipping comprehensiveness, the "this school has something for everybody" part of the American dream.

The problem is, of course, that this "something" does not now well serve "everybody," as an avalanche of recent studies of secondary schools demonstrates. In its creatively ambiguous and riotous comprehensiveness, the American high school ill serves a considerable number of young people. Correcting this means being explicit about what the school will or will not do, what its expectations -- its standards -- are. These standards arise from what we value in the adolescent students we admire....

What Is Worthy?

The modern adolescent is bombarded with "education," with informing, shaping influences. Ours is called an "information rich" culture, in contrast with an earlier, more static and insular time. All sorts of powerful signals are ginned up cheaply. Television is virtually free. Travel is easy. Merchandisers want to make our learning (at least about the virtues of their products) easy, painless and inevitable. We are awash in printed matter. We need to ask what particular and special role the school should play among this growing number of powerful educating influences to provoke

and nurture the most admirable qualities in adolescents.

The school is the principal, even unique, institution committed to helping young people use their minds well, to enjoy their intellects, to become autonomous, thinking people. And, as it brings students and teachers together in an intentional community, it teaches values -- "character" -- whether it wants to or not.

Intellect and character are inseparable goals. The young people we admire are thoughtful in two senses: their minds are disposed to inquire and inquire well; and they are considerate of those around them. School is about helping adolescents -- *all* adolescents, not just the stereotypically "academically inclined," -- to be thoughtful. To the extent that by "character" one means thoughtfulness, it implies a person's reflection. One becomes a decent person, at least in part, by understanding the consequences of things, the effects on others of one's own or outside action. Such understanding arises from habits "of thought, from the use of the intellect.

Likewise, how one addresses presumably value-free data (e.g., the physics of nuclear reaction or the biology of human reproduction) affects one's analysis. There is no such thing as "pure" science or inquiry unaffected by values. At every stage, scholarly inquiry involves choices. A thinker's faith, his commitments and his character inevitably affect which choices are made....

Many of us have, alas, low expectations of adolescents. One principal put it bluntly to me about his school: "there's too much trash here." Yes, some of his students appeared trashy: careless kids, alternately sullen and noisy, full of conformist swagger and contrived menace, kids who arrived as ninth graders with little schooling and a contempt for school. "They are going nowhere," I heard. Truly, most won't, in any conventional Horatio Alger sense (they were poor, minority youngsters). However, some might, indeed many might, *if* the conditions of their school (and, too, of their lives) would allow it, at least some of the time, and *if* adults had high expectations for them.

The standards of a school start with the adults -- the expectations they have for students. The school is "good" if all, or at least some fair sample, of the students meet those expectations to some reasonable degree. Admirable students are thoughtful. Wise schools reflect on the shape of "thoughtfulness," design their programs to provoke it and then expect their students to achieve it....

Setting Standards

The "system" appears to set standards: what's on the Regents' exam; three years of science; a longer school day; good attendance; "good standing" (i.e., being unknown to the Assistant Principal).

Many of these familiar sources of standards are sensible and useful. They can't be the end of the matter, though. *Imagination, complex reasoning, sensitivity and engagement* are qualities that can rarely be plumbed by routinized approaches. Adolescents are (or should be) more complicated than the folks conventional testing describes.

How, then, might a school begin to go beyond these typical measures? First, the school must examine its performance in terms of individual students' performance (that is, "this is a good school because the students perform well, not because we have a pretty cafeteria, 50,000 volumes in the library and a fully certified and credentialed faculty"). Second, the school must be committed (as are all Coalition schools) to giving all students serious opportunities to display their talents and to learn how to use their minds well. And third, the school must be one which engages the faculty individually and collectively in the exploration and setting of standards, and of analogous academic issues. Some ideas for making standards explicit follow:

1. Appoint a small faculty committee, drawn from a variety of departments, to design an "Exhibition," a series of exercises, tests, performances and opportunities that would allow a student in whom the faculty has pride to display the sources of that pride. Draw, as useful, on

others' similar exercises (e.g., the College Board's EQuality Project materials or some ongoing Coalition efforts) to spice your work. Whether or not the planned Exhibition is ever used, it is a powerful device to raise crucial school-wide issues.

2. Ask a number of respected, experienced faculty, as unobtrusively as possible, to "shadow" some students over the full course of two or three days, recording as well as they can how and when these students "engaged" on the central work of school to some level of intensity, what they seemed to focus on, how often they were expected to perform at some clear standard, and how thoughtfully they interacted with their peers. (The particular youngsters chosen should include both kids the faculty now "respects" and those it may not.) Having completed this exercise, the teachers would report to the faculty to what extent the school's regimen for each of these students rewarded and provided opportunities for these characteristics. (In most cases of "shadowing," the observers come out of the experience in shock, startled by the enervating pace of a six or seven period day where kids were talked at most of the time and "performance" by individuals was depersonalized in work sheets or denied in the interest of order.)
3. Set a school-wide diploma requirement (e.g., an essay or an oral presentation) and carry it out using a faculty planning committee drawn from across departments and involving *all* faculty as judges, readers and graders. (The process of "grading" will force debate on *standards* in an exquisite and desirable way.)
4. Ask several veteran faculty to pick some graduates who "did well" and "were well served by the school" and then to write up portraits of these graduates (ideally with the help of these alumni) that highlight

both the qualities that made them admirable and the ways the school promoted those qualities.

5. Ask each department to produce no more than ten questions which, when asked of graduating seniors, would give some sense of the mastery by those students of the accumulated work in each department's discipline.
6. Appoint a faculty-student committee to review all of the school's rules, regulations, routines and traditions against several key questions: Is this practice respectful of all those involved? Is it fair? Does it "teach" decency? Is it necessary? Does it encourage people to engage in productive ways? Does everyone understand the reasons for or the history of it?

We know we can set down "system-wide" certain sorts of structural "standards" like due process in student discipline; mastery of multiplication tables; that all students will study English all four years; that teachers will not hit students. We cannot, however, "set" centrally the more complex, important and interesting standards of imagination, engagement, taste, persistence, sensitivity, interest and decency. These must arise from the community that is the particular school itself. Teachers set (and model) standards; but a school's success rests ultimately upon how each student performs, lives, **engages**. Effective students mean effective schools.

Best Regards,


Ted Sizer

COALITION UPDATE

We are now 46 strong in our membership. Twelve schools form our charter group and 34 are associate schools. All follow our nine principles, albeit with differing emphases. Feel free to write us and request a listing of these schools and a thumbnail sketch describing them.

UP-COMING EVENTS

Working Party for	
Incentive Grant Recipients:	April 4
Spring Principals'	
Council Meeting:	April 5-7
Summer Workshop	
in Milton, Massachusetts:	July 13-17
(2 sessions/limited enrollment)	July 27-31
Summer Symposia	
in Avon, Connecticut:	July 5-7
in Berkeley, California:	July 23-24

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