

HORACE

COALITION OF ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS

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"LESS IS MORE"

COALITION RETHINKING THE BASIC DESIGN OF SCHOOLS

by Lynn Olson

PROVIDENCE, R.I.--Hope High School is a comprehensive, urban school struggling to improve its image. Most of its 1,050 students come from low-income minority families here, and the dropout rate is about 40 percent.

Some 200 miles away in New York State, not far from Manhattan, Bronxville High School seems a world apart. An affluent college-preparatory school, Bronxville enrolls 750 students who generally score well on standardized tests and attend prestigious universities after graduation.

But Hope High shares a common trait with Bronxville: Both are educational mavericks. They are part of a collaborative effort to revolutionize high schools by putting into practice the ideas of Theodore R.Sizer, chairman of the department of education at Brown University. "High schools," Mr. Sizer says, "exist not merely to subject the pupils to brute training--memorizing geometry theorems, dutifully showing up on time, learning how to mend an axle, reciting a passage from Macbeth--but to develop their powers of thought, of taste, and of judgment."

Coalition schools range from an alternative public high school in New York City; to a Catholic girls' school in Coventry, R.I.; to a comprehensive high school in Houston. But all share a deep dissatisfaction with the rigidity of American schooling, and a determination to make things different.

Some of the coalition schools, such as Westbury High School in Houston, are planning to remodel their entire school, one grade at a time. Others, such as Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in New York City, are brand new and began as "essential schools." Still others, such as Hope High School, have created a school-within-a-school that is based on Mr. Sizer's ideas. Eventually, these smaller "schools" may expand and alter the larger institution.

"Less Is More"

One principle that all coalition schools share is the idea that "less is more." Many of them have tried to reduce the number of classes students take and the content they cover within each class.

At CPESS, an alternative public high school in East Harlem, students days are divided roughly in half. In the morning, they attend a two-hour class in humanities or in math/science. In the afternoon, their schedule is reversed. If students want to take a foreign language, they come for an hour before the regular school day begins. If they want to participate in "extracurricular" activities, such as dance, gym, and the use of computers, they stay on after the regular school day ends.

All students take the same core curriculum, although they may read about the same topic from different sources, based on their abilities. The curriculum itself is built around central themes, chosen by the teachers. Last year, for example, the humanities course focused on "exploration." This year, students are studying "political power," particularly as it relates to the American and French revolutions.

Other coalition schools have retained the four basic academic subjects--English, history, mathematics and science--but have tried to stress the interrelationship between courses.

Most traditional schools lack this continuity, notes Mary Jane McCalmon, assistant principal of Portland High School in Maine. "We teach kids in isolated blocks," she says. "We program them with bells to change their concentration seven times a day. And there's never any crossover between subjects."

In a coalition school, students ideally could write in a science class and do computations as part of a history lesson.

Personalize Schooling

Coalition schools are also making a concerted effort to "personalize" each student's education as much as possible. According to Mr. Sizer, no problem is more troubling than the impersonality of schools. He says that "the chance of provoking excellent work from any youngster without understanding him or her as an individual is remote--a matter of pure chance or the result of home influences."

To give students and teachers the chance to know each other better, coalition schools have drastically reduced the number of students for whom teachers are responsible.

"One of the critical issues in high schools," says Judy B. Coddling, principal of Bronxville High School, "is that teachers have had the responsibility to work with too many kids.... How can you expect one teacher to understand the way 175 minds are working, much less read the papers of 160 to 175 kids?"

To solve that problem, Houston's Westbury High School has divided its 550 9th graders into teams consisting of approximately 90 to 110 students and three to four teachers. Team teachers specialize in the areas of English, mathematics, science and social studies. But like all coalition teachers, they are expected to be generalists prepared to teach other courses as well.

Other schools have supplemented such teams with even smaller seminars and tutorials for students. For example, at CPSS students gather once a day in "advisory groups" of up to 15 students, where they can discuss broad questions, such as test-taking skills, contemporary issues or problems they are having in class. "The groups also create a smaller community that's stable for kids," says Deborah Meier, director of the school.

Michael Goldman, a humanities teacher at CPSS, says that the small classes and advisory groups enable teachers to do "a lot of talking one-on-one with children. I can't see where else you could walk around and talk to kids individually." Reduced class sizes have also made teachers aware of the "enormous diversity" among students in terms of both motivation and ability, Mr. Sizer says.

Time To Plan

Under the assumption that teachers are closest to their students and know their subjects best, coalition schools are also giving teachers more time and responsibility for planning school schedules, curricula, materials and instruction.

Teachers involved in the essential-schools project at Hope High spent half a year designing their program, and still devote two periods each week to common planning. At CPSS, teachers of a particular subject also share one planning morning a week while their students do volunteer work in the community. After years of isolated work, says Patricia Walter, a humanities teacher at the school, "the power and the strength" of teachers working and planning together "is just tremendous. We

have a very special group of people who share their vulnerability. Criticism is purely supportive. We're trying to make it happen, and to use each other's insights."

But the biggest challenge for many teachers in coalition schools is actually changing the way they teach—moving from their traditional role as lecturer to that of guide, mentor and coach.

"Coaching," says Albin Moser, head teacher of the essential schools project at Hope High, is "developing the good habits that lead toward understanding, being the developer of skills. This is really slow, but we're working toward it. It's a lot easier to just stand up and talk, and feel that you're showing how smart you are as a teacher."

Clinton Vickers, headmaster of Adelphi Academy, says that before his school joined the coalition, lecturing dominated instruction. "The teacher was the one delivering the educational service," he says. "And our teachers were very good at it—excellent lecturers; bright, engaging speakers. Yet the teacher was doing the bulk of the work with the student in a quasi-passive role."

The coalition has developed a catch phrase to convey the notion that students should be engaged in and have responsibility for their own learning: "Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach."

The phrase has an "instant surface appeal for teachers," according to Grant Wiggins, research specialist for the coalition. "Teachers know what that means. They subscribe to it in theory," he says. "But they do not see what is required structurally, pedagogically or logistically to pull it off because it strikes at the heart of business as usual."

Part of the problem, says Paula Evans, director of Brown's Institute for Secondary Education and a collaborator in the coalition's efforts, is that the traditional models available to teachers involve the "teacher-as-worker, the teacher as purveyor of knowledge, the student-as-sponge. The model for being other

than a disciplinarian and class leader is not there."

"Exhibitions"

Eventually, to receive a diploma from a coalition school, students will have to demonstrate their mastery of essential skills and knowledge through a new kind of assessment, known as an "exhibition."

Developing them will be "the most difficult" part of the coalition's work, says Mr. Vickers of Adelphi Academy. "The standard instruments of measurement that we have are based upon the compilation of fact and data," he notes, "and we're saying that that's not education at all."

Holly M. Houston, executive officer of the coalition, said the exhibitions will require teachers, parents, and administrators to be "a lot clearer about what matters, and to be so committed to those things that do matter, that they can say: This is what you have to know and be able to do in order to graduate." In fact, she says, a high school diploma will mean something at those schools. "It's a testimony of a student's ability to do certain things."

Glimmers of Success

For now, evidence of success among the coalition schools is fragmentary, but encouraging. At CPESS, student attendance, even during the hot mid-June days of 1986, was more than 95 percent—a level maintained throughout the year. Attendance rates within Hope High School's essential schools project are similar, while the attendance rate for the school as a whole is 75 percent to 80 percent.

Parent involvement in the coalition schools has also improved, according to officials. For example, about 90 percent of the parents of 9th-graders involved in the project attended Westbury High School's parent-teacher conferences this year. Attendance for the rest of the school was only 11 percent.

At Nova High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, teachers meet every nine weeks with the parents of the 75 students in the essential-schools program. At the last meeting, says Lawrence G. Insel, principal of the high school, only one parent was missing.

"Intractable Obstacles"

So far, says Mr. Sizer, none of the problems that coalition schools have encountered--from uninterested state governments to hostile school boards--has surprised him. But, he adds, "Some of it seems so intractable, because the incentives aren't there to do anything else."

One of the most vexing problems, he says, has been the high turnover among school administrators. Of the eight public school systems in which core schools are located, five have changed superintendents at least once since the coalition began. "School boards change, too," Mr. Sizer adds. "But the superintendent is critical. If a superintendent really wants something to happen, it is more likely to occur than if he or she does not."

In addition, many of Mr. Sizer's proposals clash with existing state rules and regulations--from certifying teachers in one subject to mandating the number and concentration of credits needed for graduation. Coalition schools have usually had to seek waivers from either state or district boards, as well as local teachers' unions, in order to function. And Mr. Sizer notes that there are few incentives for teachers and principals to take risks.

He adds, however, that he is much "more hopeful" about the regulatory climate than he was three years ago. "I think the kind of rhetoric you find in the governors' report, the report of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, suggests policies much more congenial with what we are all about: the notion of variety and school-site authority and experimentation," he says.

Quantity or Quality?

There are many who suggest, however, that the coalition will need to be much larger than it now is, to have an impact on the structure and constraints of American secondary education as a whole.

To date, staff members at Brown have been concerned about maintaining the high quality of their interaction with individual schools, and have been reluctant to expand too quickly.

"It's sort of an argument between quantity and quality," says Ms. Houston, "and the tension is very much alive." She notes that, even among the coalition's funders, "many have very different opinions on the subject and advise us in different ways."

Meanwhile, to promote the efforts of those interested in carrying out his ideas, Mr. Sizer is working on a follow-up to *Horace's Compromise* that will examine how schools can restructure themselves without incurring costly new expenditures. He anticipates, however, that it will be 5 to 10 years before the success of the coalition's efforts can really be measured. In the end, he argues, success can only be determined by what the students from coalition schools know and can do.

"Graduates from these schools," he says, "should significantly out perform their adolescent peers on any respectable academic test, and they should be noticeably more thoughtful, judicious, and fair-minded--more decent toward their fellow students, he adds--than teen-agers in other settings."

The most exciting change seen in students so far, according to Herb Rosenfeld, associate director of CPESS, is "the kind of independent, outspoken sense of freedom that you see in these kids. To me, that's the biggest difference between them and the kids anyplace else I've ever worked."