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RESTRUCTURING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

My intention in writing the following school "silhouettes" is to reveal the prominent, and we think critical, features of schools that are being restructured. To do this, I have relied on my own and my school colleagues' powers of description and analysis, and have focused attention upon a few hybrid models of secondary schools.

Thomas and Alva High Schools are actually composites of several Essential Schools-in-the-making whose students and faculty have permitted us to see both their planning and implementation phases "from the inside." As such, these aggregate pictures of school structure and life are deliberate simplifications. Their complexities have been reduced in order that we may attend to what seem at this stage to the most pivotal indicators of successful or unsuccessful organizational overhaul.

Thomas High School became associated with the Coalition in 1985 as result of quiet urging by the district superintendent. A decision was made by the principal and superintendent at that time to organize the Thomas Essential School as a separate entity within the larger comprehensive high school. With some funding from corporate foundations, the district was able to hire a central office curric-

ulum supervisor as the planner and administrator for the Essential School. Four teachers were to be hired, one in each of the "essential" subjects--English, Social Studies, Science, and Math--and approximately 100 students were to be recruited for the ninth grade. Now in its second year of operation, the Thomas Essential School has already stabilized and, in some ways, regressed. The teachers describe their relationship with the surrounding comprehensive high school as tenuous at best; at times it is overtly hostile. There are few occasions for interaction or reasons for interdependence among the faculties of these two schools housed within the same building. Just as distressing is the fact that during their first year the teachers had literally thrown off the shackles of the six-period day in favor of a four-period schedule that included a common one-hour planning period/lunch, but today they have no common planning time and no hour-long lunch breaks. Their explanation of this particular regression is that the schedule of the larger school devoured their experiment, and they acknowledge that they should have been more vigilant in protecting it.

The principal of Thomas High School is a well informed educator who supports the Coalition effort from a distance. The daily responsibility for running the Essential School program and making the dozens of (apparently minor) decisions that coalesce into policy is delegated to the Essential School coordinator. There have been many instructive events in the Thomas Essential School over the past eighteen months. One of these occurred within the first month of the program. The math teacher found that the so-called ability levels of his 100 students ranged from the second grade (unable to do basic arithmetic operations) to beyond the "algebra I" that he had intended to teach. Since he was the only math

teacher in the program, he decided to design his classes around the principles of "individualized instruction." Every student was given his or her own assignment to do either alone or with classmates. The teacher's role was to compare completed homework and tests to the answer sheets filed in his *bottom desk drawer*, and then to make an appropriate follow-up assignment. In theory this may appear to be a sound solution to the problems that arise when more than half the students in one's charge are not prepared for high school-level work, but in practice this amounts to doing 100 tutorials per day. It took this teacher about four weeks to admit to deep fatigue and frustration.

A second noteworthy occurrence happened after the close of the first semester. All four teachers in the Essential School had agreed in September that there would be a minimum score for passing in each subject. Those students who did not pass the first semester would (somehow) have to make up the missed or failed work in order to receive credit. The minimal score that was adopted as "the standard" was borrowed from the district's competency exam cut-off score: 75%. By mid-December of that first year more than half the students had failed to complete one or more classes. Now that the students had shown themselves to be all over the map in terms of achievement and fully half of them had not met the minimal standard for passing, what could be done to make it possible for the *teachers and their students to move on to semester II -- movement demanded by the lock-step pace of tradition?*

In both situations the faculty of the Thomas Essential School responded to "the problem" by relying on the known and familiar: Several students were released from the program on the grounds that they were not yet mature or responsible enough for it. Another strong urge was to admit a group of students whose "ability levels" were homogeneous so as to make the teachers' jobs easier.

Alva High School is a little larger than Thomas. On most days the student population exceeds 2,100, but it can fluctuate so much

from one month to the next that class size and composition are rarely fixed. Alva has a decidedly urban constituency, though by big city standards it "feels" suburban. When a dozen teachers were asked why they wanted to affiliate with the Coalition of Essential Schools, *most revealed that they had a memory of a better Alva High School that they wanted to stir back to reality.* An advisory committee, chaired by the principal and composed of parents, teachers, and two students was formally established. By mid-summer, they had outlined a plan for an experimental ninth grade cluster of three teachers and 90 students that would begin operation that September.

Now midway through its second year of operation, the entire ninth grade at Alva is organized in groups of 75 to 100 pupils, each one served by a team of either 3 or 4 teachers. The issue of team size is a delicate one at Alva because many teachers do not like teaching the "odd subject," which is what is required for teams composed of three teachers who must nonetheless teach four subjects. The three experimental cluster teachers had, however, forewarned of the additional strain associated with teaching subjects that one has never before taught, in spite of one's "dual certification." This warning came in the form of advice during transitional team meetings last summer, and it is suggestive of the many ways in which the whole crew of ninth grade teachers was able to benefit from the experience of those few who had made the maiden voyage the previous year. After the first half of this second year, several changes were made in the team configurations, and the school's administration continues to be responsible to the teachers' requests for modifications and guidance.

The principal of Alva High School is actively involved in policy decisions that affect the Essential School. Even if she were not disposed to be so involved, it behooves her to be since the Essential school now involves a quarter of the student body and will probably expand to include a portion of the tenth grade next year. The principal's other duties have not diminished, but she has devised a system

of school governance that allows her to share some managerial responsibilities with members of the Essential School Advisory Committee and with some of the teachers who had worked most closely with her during the early months of deliberation and planning. Last summer, one teacher was hired as the coordinator of the Essential School. This new coordinator has earned the respect of many teachers because of his administrative acumen, his wide acclaim as a drama coach and his visible commitment to opening channels of communication. He has no formal supervisory duties, but has more time than the principal does to visit classes and talk to teachers about matters of teaching and learning.

This year there are enough ninth-grade History, English, Science and Math teachers to constitute four small "departments." Early in the fall the ninth grade teachers began meeting as departments every other week or so. This form of mutual self-help complements the team meetings that take place informally (whenever there is a problem) and formally (about once a week). Another important feature of the Alva Essential School is that students can take two outside "electives" and are free to participate in extracurricular activities.

The experience of the teachers and students at both Thomas and Alva Essential Schools suggests that some structural features may be more promising than others. Looking back to the Coalition's common principles, we can isolate their major implications and begin to assess the structural features of the programs at these two imaginary schools. The common principles suggest the need for genuine leadership from the principal and her staff; the principles emphasize the role of assessment as a guide for teachers and students; they also imply a need for imaginative staffing plans; and they pose the question of what must be sacrificed if we are to realize this simplified structure without doubling our per-pupil expenditure. Paying close attention to these four issues, particularly the need for assessments of student learning that emphasize student exhibition of mastery and staffing plans that will encourage collaboration and personalization, we can propose a design for the *Edison Essential School* -- an Essential

School whose structural qualities are borrowed from the best of Thomas and Alva Essential Schools.

The design will reveal at least three important structural components. The scale of the restructured school is sufficiently large to permit flexibility in team assignments. There may be as many as fifteen interdisciplinary teams, suggesting that teachers and students could be carefully matched. (This also implies that the "new" structure is now the norm, and therefore not threatened by a larger or more traditional framework for organizing school life.) In addition, there are expectations that a variety of people will assume **leadership responsibilities**, thus making organizational flexibility and accountability possible and likely. The department chairpersons would act as assessment teams and examiners, for instance, thus investing real responsibility and authority at the department level. And finally, this design has built into it a system of **checks and balances**. Departments and teams perform important balancing functions for one another, and they ensure that each teacher feels the pull of dual allegiance: The responsibility that the departments have for developing subject-specific tests (called Performances) balances with teams' responsibility to devise Exhibitions that will encourage the integration of knowledge and skill across disciplines.

At Edison Essential School, each **department** collaborates on decisions pertaining to:

- Choice of subject matter within courses.
- Selection of resources.
- Essential questions, theories, concepts.
- Essential skills.
- Design and review of Performances.

The Performances within courses are intended to focus students' and teachers' attention on Essential questions and skills specific to a discipline. The Department Chairpersons act together as an assessment team, sharing responsibility for reviewing

"tests" and advising individual teachers. Departments should meet for one full week during the summer to devise and refine Performances for the following fall semester. Similarly, 3-5 days of meeting time should be reserved for teachers during the winter recess.

Each team of four teachers is responsible for 80-100 students, as well as for:

- Design and coordination of class schedules.
Within each Team's schedule there should be time reserved for at least one Team meeting and one Department meeting per week.
- Integration of knowledge and skill instruction.
- Design of Exhibitions, subject to review by Board of Examiners.
The Exhibition is intended to bring about integration of skills and subject matter. The Board of Examiners is made up of Department Chairpersons and outside consultants.
- Meeting together for 1-2 weeks during the summer and again during winter recess for planning, design and coordination purposes.

The school structure suggested by the Edison Essential School design is only as sturdy as the teachers there are responsible and competent. Teachers become competent by having had rigorous educations themselves and by working under conditions that afford opportunities for frequent reflection and feedback on their professional practice. It is they who can establish and breathe life into an institutional mission, and in so doing ensure that aims cohere and are intelligible to adults and adolescents. They are also the ones in whom trust should be placed for managing resources within the school. These qualities of an able teaching staff in any school are the result of careful recruitment, thoughtful evaluation of teaching, continuous teacher education and decentralized budget management.

The practices and structures emerging in the Coalition are attempts to organize school life with particular values in mind. To the degree that these new structures permit adults and adolescents to "learn to use their minds well" and to participate in the formation of a fair and humane social environment, they may be deemed appropriate or successful. We have seen some promising indicators of successful restructuring -- as embodied in the design of Edison Essential School.

A web of interlocking responsibilities for devising and implementing school policy must be established. This system of checks and balances should be employed for the development of long-term plans, the evaluation of student learning as displayed in Performances and Exhibitions, and in the design of budgets and staffing plans. The school is to be viewed as a network of interdependent people, each of whom bears special responsibility for students' learning.

These structural features do not themselves ensure that children will be challenged and delighted by schooling. Nor are they adequate for the task of re-educating our teaching force. But, just as present-day expectations are largely determined by the structures within which we are socialized and educated, alternative structures for schooling can profoundly influence our vision of the possible.

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Editorial Note: This will be the only issue of **HORACE** published during the summer months.