

HORACE

COALITION OF ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS

Brown University
Education Department - Box 1938
Providence, Rhode Island 02912
(401)863-3384

SEPTEMBER 1987

Vol. 3, No. 5

Lilly Costa, Managing Editor
Grant Wiggins, Editor-in-Chief

MYTHOS HIGH SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY

by Joseph McCarthy and Susan Follett

The windshield wipers of her ten-year old Ford slapped a monotonous cadence as Rose Van Winkle, principal of Mythos High School, drove through the dark, suburban streets last Thursday night. She sighed as she realized that she would be getting home past 11:00 for the third night in a row. Why had she ever wanted to become a principal? She had been happy as a high school English teacher. Teaching hadn't been easy, but she had shaped her courses to bring out the best in her students, and they had made her feel needed and appreciated. Now all she did was spend her evenings trying to explain dropping test scores and rising costs to the superintendent and the school board.

They just didn't understand what it was like to run a comprehensive public high school. There are so many demands and legal requirements that have to be met, with little room for creative management. Every constituency is clamoring for more attention and more of the resources. Special education, the gifted and now even the "forgotten middle" all want an ever-increasing piece of the finite pie. What could Rose do? As a new principal, she had dreamt of shaping the school as she had shaped her classroom to provide a successful work environment for kids, but everything was locked into the status quo. She had neither the authority nor the resources for change.

When she finally arrived home, Rose found that she was too tired to cook and that she didn't have much of an appetite anyway. Crawling into her overstuffed corduroy easy

chair, she reached for the remote control and flicked on the TV. She thought she'd catch the nightly news, but it was too late for that. Ted Koppel was already well ensconced -- talking about the budget while at the same time refereeing a debate between the Treasury Secretary and a very articulate hog farmer from Iowa. Rose took some solace from the thought that, at least, she wasn't running up a deficit for future principals. She tried to concentrate on what the farmer was saying, but she was too exhausted. She put her head back and closed her eyes just for a minute. She didn't want to fall asleep in the chair as she had done the night before.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the front door. Rose jumped to her feet, startled. "Who on earth could that be at midnight?" she wondered. Cautiously, she approached the door, and out of habit she flicked the switch to her porch lamp, which had been broken for weeks. By some miracle the lamp worked, flooding the front porch in yellow light. Rose peeked through the peep hole to find Dr. Nelson, the superintendent of schools, staring back at her; and someone was standing behind him. Quickly, Rose unbolted the door. The person with Nelson was Petra Barton, president of the school board. Rose's heart sank. She was certain they had come to demand her resignation, but what an odd time to do it. And they were both smiling at her.

Nelson began by apologizing for the late intrusion, but he assured Rose that she'd forgive him when she heard the news. He said that after hearing her presentation, the board had met in executive session and had agreed on a fairly radical proposal. They had decided to give her full school-based management.

Rose must have looked confused because Barton interrupted Nelson to explain that the board would give Rose complete control over the high school budget and that she could spend it any way she wanted. In fact, the board would even authorize some small increases as long as Rose tried to keep them to a minimum. Nelson said that, in addition, the teachers' association had agreed to be as cooperative as possible with any changes as long as people weren't put out of work. Rose thought she must be dreaming, but before she could pinch herself, Nelson was promising to keep the state off her back as long as she kept him informed about what she was doing. He apologized again for the late visit, but both he and Barton had felt certain she'd want to know the news right away. And they couldn't pass up the chance to see the look on her face when they told her. Rose felt wide awake as she closed the front door. Her head was already swimming with possibilities for reshaping the high school.

Rose had originally scoffed at the Carnegie Report's recommendation that schools be given control of their own budgets and programs. She couldn't imagine a school board and superintendent allowing a school that much autonomy. And now here she sat at 1:00 a.m. with her budget before her and the opportunity to restructure her entire school. Of course, she'd want to involve the rest of the staff in this, but she couldn't resist a little dreaming. And it wouldn't hurt to have some initial proposals to kick around. The truth was that for years Rose had been imagining ways of making her school more effective, and she knew what she'd like to change first.

Rose was frustrated with the conventional structure of Mythos. Every department operated like a little fiefdom jealous of its authority and its annual funding. She was certain that this led to replication of effort and fiscal inefficiency, but she had not been able to persuade the school board that an inter-departmental organization would be better. Now all she had to do was convince the faculty. This wouldn't be easy, but she suspected many of them would welcome the chance to try a new approach. Rose felt certain she could improve

on the status quo and save money at the same time.

Mythos' total budget was only \$3.2 million. With 1,350 students, the per capita expenditure was a mere \$2,565. Despite this modest budget, Mythos spent nearly 10% of its funds on administration and guidance and nearly a quarter of a million dollars on athletics and physical education. Rose saw the need for guidance and P.E., but she was convinced that these things could be done for less money and that they could even be done better for less. Mythos was mired in a slavish fealty to tradition. "That's the way we've always done it here" was no longer going to be the Mythos motto.

First, Rose would decentralize by dividing the school into 5 houses with three teams in each house and 90 kids on a team, and she'd give the teams maximum responsibility and authority. The teams and houses would handle discipline, purchasing and, to a large extent, curriculum. This new configuration would allow the school to streamline its administrative staff to one principal and one counselor who would coordinate the guidance activities of the houses and teams. This smaller administrative staff would result in savings which could be reinvested in instructional materials.

Another thing she'd like to do would be to reduce the custodial staff to two experienced people and initiate a program that would involve the students in the upkeep of their own building. She felt strongly that this would not only lead to an increase in personal responsibility and a decrease in vandalism, but that it could also lead to a stronger sense of identification with the school. This move would also save some more money that could be returned to the houses for instruction. If the houses and teams were to feel they had authority, then it would be important to give them some fiscal autonomy. Finally, Rose was committed to raising teacher salaries so she could both retain the talented faculty and attract the best young professionals available. She felt like a kid in a candy store as she rolled up her sleeves and reached for her calculator.

By 2:00 a.m. Rose had been able to give each team \$11,000 for instructional expenses, and she'd figured out a scheme for raising faculty salaries 25%. Most of her cuts were things Rose thought the school could well live without or could accomplish at a much lower cost. Other changes would be more controversial, but Nelson and Barton had promised her free reign, and she was taking them at their word. By cutting funds from substitute teachers, the student activities fund and a special audio-visual fund, as well as a few other items, Rose had been able to trim her budget by 11% producing a \$400,000 surplus. Of course, she had cut \$100,000 out of the athletic budget, and she knew this would be controversial. She liked football and basketball, but she didn't feel it should all be supported by school funds. After all, East Catholic had a very small athletic budget, but they always seemed to beat Mythos. Rose felt certain that the booster clubs could step in and fill the void in the athletic budget and maybe even do a better job.

Buoyed by her success at trimming the budget, Rose imagined other ways the surplus could be used. Perhaps instead of a raise she'd reduce the teacher/student ratio to 15/1 by hiring 15 additional teachers. Maybe she'd just use the money to hire twenty aides and five clerical staff relieving the teachers of all but instructional duties and providing them with in-class assistance. Of course, it might make sense to use the surplus to establish a three-tier salary schedule designed to reward and retain the better teachers. All of these things were possible now that she had authority over her own budget. Rose was exhausted but happy as she sat back down in her easy chair.

Rose heard a voice say "budget," and she opened her eyes to the morning news on her TV. She sat for a moment trying to remember why she was in the chair and why the TV was on. She must have fallen asleep there again last night. The remote control was still in her lap. She got up and stumbled to her desk. There were no papers, no budgets. Her calculator was still in her briefcase. Her adventure in re-shaping the budget had all been just a very pleasant dream. Rose showered and

dressed and prepared to head back to school. Strangely enough, she didn't feel as discouraged as she had the previous night. Maybe something could be done after all. On her way out the door she noticed that the porch light was still on.

Readers who would be interested in more information on Rose's fantasy budget transformations, with sample printed and interactive spreadsheets, should write to Sue Follett, Staff Associate for the Coalition of Essential Schools.

A SUMMER REPORT

The Workshops

by Grant Wiggins

Most conferences involve talk about teaching and learning. This summer's Coalition workshops, based at Milton Academy and led by Holly Houston and Grant Wiggins, gave participants a truly hands-on experience: Coalition teachers became the "workers" as they spent five mornings in classrooms observing and working with high school juniors who were attending six-week summer courses of the Massachusetts Advanced Studies Program (MASP). Teamed with MASP teachers and the college interns assigned to each course, participants included groups from Walbrook (Baltimore) and Central Park East (New York), as well as individual teachers from Springdale (Arkansas), Whitfield (St. Louis), Brighton (Rochester), Adelphi (Brooklyn), St. Xavier's (Coventry, R.I.), St. Andrews-Sewanee (Tennessee), University Heights (Bronx) and Nova (Ft. Lauderdale) High Schools.

Each team attempted to maximize the idea of "student as worker" as Coalition teachers taught a lesson or two and were videotaped in action. Because the classes were small (averaging 15) and involved highly motivated students about to enter their senior year, opportunities were plentiful for rich experimentation. In addition to the morning classes, the teachers and interns spent the

afternoon analyzing videotape, discussing their collaboration, and considering the structural and curricular changes required to best honor the idea of "student as worker."

Informal evening discussions over coffee were spirited and enlightening as we shared the delights and pitfalls of school reform. There was agreement that this more intensive, classroom-based, summer workshop experience is a great way to advance experimentation with Coalition principles. And Chuck Burdick, the Director of MASP, gave a masterful "performance" and coaching job on how to dissect and eat New England lobster!

The Symposia

by Amy Gerstein

Not only were there workshops at MASP to attend, those interested in the Coalition could also participate in a summer symposium on either coast: in Avon, Connecticut, or in Stockton, California. In past summers, there was only one large summer symposium offered in Providence, but increased growth and interest in the Coalition suggested that we hold two symposia this year. Each symposium offered essentially the same program focusing on the theme of "Student as Worker." The East Coast Symposium had a somewhat greater emphasis on curriculum reform and was co-hosted by the Avon School District. The West Coast Symposium emphasized middle schools and was co-hosted by the University of the Pacific and Lincoln Unified School District. The presentations and workshops were led

primarily by recipients of 1986-87 Incentive Grants. Each presenter shared his or her experiences in the classroom using the principle of "Student as Worker."

The geographic and pedagogic diversity of the summer staff was representative of the Coalition: Sandy Garcia and Pat Dineley of Stockton shared their own interpretation of Cooperative Learning; Margo Kendrick and Barbara Reed of Houston assisted teachers in designing lessons and preparing the student to be the worker; Sue Groesbeck of Rochester (N.Y.) described her experience of wrestling with the principle of "Less Is More" in a foreign language classroom; Madeleine Friedman of Ft. Lauderdale introduced Critical Thinking strategies for students; and at Avon, Albin Moser of Providence discussed his impressions of working on a Coalition team.

Two of the presenters were administrators: Tom Jones, Brighton High School (Rochester) principal, spoke of organizational change; and at Avon, Suzanne Alvord, Nova Middle School (Ft. Lauderdale) principal, talked about her role in equipping Coalition faculty. Robby Fried of the Coalition staff offered advice on "trouble shooting" in a Coalition school.

A working draft of the text *Student as Worker* was distributed to be perused, digested and commented upon, as well as to pique discussion. Comments and recommendations are warmly solicited by the writer/editor of the text, Grant Wiggins.

COALITION CENTRAL STAFF

Ted Sizer, Chairman

Holly Houston, Executive Director

Susan Follett, Staff Associate

Liliana Costa, Assistant Director

Robby Fried, Education Consultant

Grant Wiggins, Director of Research

Amy Gerstein, Staff Associate

Jeanie Herzog, Administrative Secretary

John Watkins, Education Consultant