

HORACE

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11 SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM THAT ARE RADICAL -- BUT SHOULDN'T BE

by Grant Wiggins

The new school year opens with 49 schools in the Coalition -- 49 different experiments with the nine Common Principles. The following thoughts are designed to provoke our new friends and challenge our old friends as they go about this fascinating and difficult business. Some of the suggestions are hopelessly idealistic; all, however, attempt to propose solutions to issues of genuine concern to all Essential-Schools-in-the-making. The aim is to stimulate discussion and keep alive the larger questions that threaten to be overlooked in the hurly-burly of daily schoolkeeping.

1. View classroom staffing needs through the eyes of the Varsity Football staff. Ignored in the talk of the "unrealistic" cost of decreasing the teacher-student load to a Coalition ideal of 80-1 is the fact that in even the poorest schools, the Varsity Football program is usually organized on about a 40-3 basis, with a 2-hour timeblock every day. In short, it is understood that to run a quality athletic program with personalized coaching, the ratio simply cannot be much higher and the time cannot be shorter. The public is not currently convinced that good classroom teaching is as labor-intensive as good athletic coaching -- such that a 10-1 or 15-1 ratio is a necessity, not a luxury. Re-conceptualizing the problem so that it stresses a new definition of teaching as coaching should be the first priority in seeking more funding.

2. Give exams a year after a course is

taken. With all the current talk about "cultural literacy" and the desire to ensure that students are taught every essential idea and skill, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that 90% of what is taught and tested is soon forgotten. The most convincing way to justify to skeptics that "less is more" is to show how "more is less" -- how "coverage" leads to forgettable learning. Testing students a year after they have taken a course to see what is recalled will provide an instructive and perhaps sobering lesson about conventional course design and testing.

3. Stop thinking of education in terms of "content" and start thinking of it in terms of "intellectual habits." It is hard to imagine a soccer coach saying "but we 'covered' corner kicks last month!" or a music teacher complaining that "I already gave you a clear lecture on how to position your fingers on the guitar." But teachers routinely expect that an idea or skill taught once will be internalized -- as if education were inoculation.

To internalize a new habit -- note-taking skills, problem-solving strategies in math, even new conceptual knowledge such as $F=ma$ -- requires that the student practice a skill or idea in context and from different perspectives. What would it mean to teach analytic reading as a *habit*? Even "critical thinking" is misunderstood if it is reduced to lessons. If "suspension of judgment" and "receptivity to new ideas" are alien habits (as they are for many students), how do we help students break their old, dysfunctional habits and find the new ones attractive? What classroom practices reinforce the older habits? What do weight loss and substance abuse programs teach us about the

resistance to developing better habits, even when people want to change?

4. Insist that all major decisions about curriculum, discipline and school standards be made by consensus. (We are indebted to Nancy Mohr, Principal of University Heights Alternative High School, for this idea used in her school.) Schools tend to be "conservative" in a literal sense. The usual rules of governance (top-down decision-making, faculty decisions by majority vote, etc.) are appropriate for retention of the status quo, inappropriate for promoting and managing institutional change. Of particular concern to current Coalition projects is avoiding a "we vs. they" or "in-group vs. out-group" thinking that is often promoted by Robert's Rules of Order and bureaucratic compartmentalization.

Why not insist that major decisions in Coalition projects involve not just team-wide consensus but school-wide consensus (or if the school is very large, consensus among all appropriate representatives)? What can we learn from Quaker meetings, schools run as "just communities," and other non-traditional governance structures about ensuring greater harmony and collaboration while reforming a school from the inside out?

5. Students should have a major role in the on-going evaluation of current Coalition experiments. Because the effect on students and their learning is what we should be concerned with, students are properly entitled to a say in whether a particular approach, unit or structure is working. (For example, Hope Essential High School last year surveyed all their students with an extensive questionnaire.) This need not be elaborate: a former colleague of mine handed out blank index cards each week on which students were encouraged to note the best and worst aspects of the previous week's work, with reasons. Another inclusive strategy is to provide students with a voice on a steering committee, as some Coalition schools now do.

6. Since genuine experiments require alternative approaches and control groups, each school project should use a number of teams working with different

structures and emphases. Only one approach at a time to redesign is usually attempted in each school; when the project expands, the new group or team generally takes the experimental model as a given. Though courage and mutual trust are required to do it, why not have a friendly competition between teams to determine which approaches work better with roughly equal student populations? Otherwise, we run the risk of having no clear sense of why aspects of a Coalition project succeed or fail in a school.

7. Do not waste class time on "teaching." Make classwork be work appropriate to class; thus, make homework count. There are only three reasons to come together in a class: to do work collaboratively; to be "coached" while performing or practicing, with feedback from teachers and peers; or to experience something that cannot be communicated in print. Given the existence of textbooks and assignment sheets, it is a waste of precious time to devote classes to lectures: better to coach students to read while in class and let students practice answering questions about the reading for homework.

Put differently, a primary obligation in upholding standards is to make homework essential, insisting that classwork depend on and build off of homework, not take the place of it or duplicate it. There are any number of reasons why this suggestion is impractical at present (lack of reading skills, jobs after school, etc.), but each school would be wise to develop a long-range plan for redressing the situation.

8. All academic courses should initially be conceived as if they were to be taught to the top-track students. To honor Common Principles 1, 3 and 6 ("students should learn to use their minds well"... "the school's goals should apply to all students"... "the diploma should be awarded upon an exhibition of mastery"), we should ensure that the *kind* of work done in Advanced Placement or Honors courses is done school-wide. It is a sad irony that the most interesting work is often found in the courses where students are already well-motivated -- namely, the work

that demands greater initiative and creativity in research, arguing a thesis, etc.

The suggestion is not meant to be taken too literally: schools need to think of raising standards across the board while simultaneously providing better "scaffolding" for weaker students. The aim is not to ignore the needs of the less able, but to respond to their needs by making challenging work simpler. Physics is not inherently more difficult than biology; Shakespeare can be read by anyone with profit if the right kind of support systems are provided. To use a metaphor, schools should provide better "training wheels" for less able students -- as opposed to "dummying down" the curriculum and keeping the less able or less ambitious stuck on an intellectual tricycle.

9. Better incentives should be provided by the grading system. Implicit in the previous idea is a need for rethinking our grading system. Too often a set of grades represents a self-fulfilling prophecy to students (as when teachers say "oh, he's a 'C' student.") And rarely do grades and comments help students gauge their *overall* progress toward meeting diploma requirements based on competence.

Grades are only symbols of standards, not the standards themselves. A "D" on a paper does not tell a student how to improve or what criteria have to be internalized. In the ideal Essential School, grades as we know them would play a minor role -- just as they play little or no role in athletics or drama where students learn to judge their work by comparisons with models and earlier efforts and the demands of the performance. Progress comes through successive approximations. The good writer knows when a paper is adequate; the well-trained science student is not satisfied with sloppy and incomplete lab results. Assessment should *teach* standards, not simply apply them.

How can we devise a grading and feedback system that sets all students a clearer target while also providing better incentives for those who start out at a disadvantage? Here are two different ideas:

(a) A system that encourages the less able by initially rewarding effort and progress. All students would be expected to do the same work, but the grade systems used would be different and dependent on entry-level ability. Thus, imagine if schools were like city softball leagues: players would begin in one of three grading "leagues" or levels -- even though they would be in the *same* classroom doing the *same* work.

For the least able students, the initial "standard" would have more to do with effort and improvement than objective mastery. (After all, Little Leaguers play the "same" authentic game as professionals, but are judged on their own terms.) "Mastery" as measured relative to exit-level knowledge might count for half their grade; progress over the course of the year would determine the other half. In the middle league, the ratio of mastery/progress might be 66/33%; and in the third league, the grade might be 75/25% or higher, depending upon the course. The students' grade in the gradebook would always be followed by a Roman numeral, indicating their "league" (as a way to help the colleges read the transcript and fairly judge students relative to each other more effectively).

This system may seem to resemble tracking but actually heads in the opposite direction. Rather than a system of rigid parallel tracks, the aim and expectation is that students will move up. Just as the winners in a lower division move up to the next division in softball leagues, students who started in the lowest level would move up after getting a certain GPA. They might be *required* to move up by a specified time or be deemed on academic probation. And, it would thus be possible to move *down*: the good student, like the good athlete, should not be allowed to "go through the motions." Bright but disaffected students would be held accountable for their attitude and habits in their grade.

(b) Have each teacher routinely design a range of questions on final exams or exhibitions, with "degree of difficulty" points tacked onto each question (as modeled on the system used in competitive diving). Students would receive both grades and degree of difficulty

points, with graduation dependent upon a certain standard for both. This would encourage teachers to design more "personalized" tests having a wider range of challenges, as well as encourage the less able student to achieve authentic success while mindful of the need to become more proficient.

10. Schools should develop a pre-test and post-test to measure to their own satisfaction the effect of the school on student performance. While appropriate to complain about the limitations of standardized testing, it is unwise to ignore the need for making judgments about the overall effectiveness of schooling. A legitimate test of a school's effectiveness depends on the ability to make judgments about the *relative* progress of its students over time.

Do your school's students actually improve as a whole in their reading and writing ability over the course of four years? The good schools would be those that have the steepest curve of improvement, not those whose students have the highest average scores. By picking or designing a test of essential skills and knowledge, given to students at the end of each year, a faculty provides vital insights for itself in assessing its own work.

11. Schools, not universities, should be the primary home of researchers. The school should be a "center of inquiry" (to invoke the title of Robert Schaefer's 20-year-old book). There should be full-time and part-time employees of the school who are qualified to conduct educational research, while working in an "assessment center" under the jurisdiction of Principals, Deans and/or Department Heads. Is a new teaching approach effective? Does one schedule work better than others? Are teachers spending increasingly less time as the classroom "workers"? Implicit in this idea is that many veteran teachers should be hired to both teach and conduct research.

Remember: the suggestions above are provocations. Attention to the problems is what matters.

CURRICULUM BANK BEGINS

The central staff is now collecting short but illustrative examples of transformed lessons, units and syllabi that best exemplify the idea of "Student as Worker, Teacher as Coach." We encourage all readers of *HORACE* to submit models and examples to us. All the lessons and syllabi submitted will be catalogued and indexed.

Submissions should be written in a "before" and "after" fashion. Briefly list the old lesson with the "content covered" and the teaching approaches used; then describe in a 1-2 page outline how the student was made the worker in the new version. We will select one or two a month for publication in *HORACE*. Authors of the most imaginative examples will be asked to become Coalition consultants.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP?

The Coalition is a partnership between many schools and Brown University. This alliance is particularly visible at Hope High School in Providence, where teachers and students work closely with faculty and students from Brown's Education Department. On a typical day at Hope, one might find clinical professors of education working with high school students and Hope teachers working with Brown's graduate and undergraduate student teachers or interns.

If you are interested in learning more about this partnership, contact Paula Evans at Brown (401-863-1486) or Albin Moser at Hope (401-456-9329). The Brown faculty roster at Hope Essential School also includes David Kobrin (Social Studies), Joe McDonald (English), and Grace Taylor (Biology).