



## Coalition of Essential Schools

Brown University, Education Department, Box 1938

# HORACE

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### Too Big? Too Small? A Mid-Winter Report on the Work of the Coalition by Ted Sizer

With thoughts of spring in mind, let's dream a bit, and look ahead. Say that we happily find in a few years' time that some of the central ideas that Coalition member schools share are found to be sturdily workable in their schools. Kids engage — students-as-workers. They perform well, and enjoy doing so. Teachers, now with eighty or fewer students, are genuinely getting to know each youngster well, effectively matching their teaching to what those particular youngsters need. The program and priorities of the schools are focused, clearer for all involved, illumined by and leading to Exhibitions which are demanding, fair exercises in original learning. The schools are orderly, happy, purposeful..

Should it so happen — as we all hope and expect — that the "nine common principles" are proven to work, can this "success" have effects beyond the schools in the Coalition? Or will our efforts remain but a glorious sideshow affecting but a handful of schools and never the central business of schooling, as is so often the case in school reform? Put alternatively, does the Coalition have its scale right?

I am frequently asked these questions. They are, of course — save in hope-filled dreams — premature: however old-fashioned and commonsensical are the ideas which band us together and inform our work, the effectiveness of their full expression in a variety of schools remains to be fully demonstrated.

However, some CES schools are by now well launched, and their students and teachers appear to be making notable progress. "It works," some of those involved and some observers say; or "some of it works"; or "it clearly can work, with time and effort." Such reports tantalize folks who have been watching us, and a momentum for involvement of more

schools accelerates. The opportunity for work on a larger scale presents itself.

*Too small.* Some respected advisors tell us that our current work is "too small," in at least two senses. We as yet have too few schools involved, our critics argue, to yield a large enough number of "successful" examples of Coalition ideas to have leverage on the "system." I am asked by a friendly, but Doubting Thomas: "Given the great political and pedagogical difficulties of changing long-established habits of school-keeping, how many of your colleague schools really will succeed in the ambitious work they and you have taken on? Half? A third? A fifth?"

I hesitate and don't answer. He does: "Let's say a fifth make it. How many such "successful" schools do you need to be taken seriously by policy-makers? Fifty? Five hundred? So, how many schools must be within the Coalition at the start?" The prospect projected by my Doubting Thomas friend is daunting. It would mean a Coalition of several hundreds of schools. "Unless you get the scale right, you're wasting your time...nibbling at the edges of one of the most important issues on our public agenda." Such talk sobers.

In her essay in the previous issue of HORACE, Holly Houston suggested another dimension of our smallness, the Coalition's relatively insignificant effort to affect the political and bureaucratic context within which our colleague schools live. A disinterested bureaucracy and public will starve a Coalition experiment. A hostile environment can quickly smother one. Even a well-intentioned, but tradition-laden bureaucracy can frustrate an over-worked Coalition school staff into despair. We must be attentive to the "outsides" as well as to the "insides" of Coalition schools, Holly argues. Here again, then, we're too small — this time in the scope and focus of our work.

*Too Big.* But I also know that we're already too big. It takes a tight community of pioneers to pull off any

consequential reform. They need to know each other well enough and long enough to be trustful of each other. They have to represent a variety of schools, ones where differences can provoke new ideas within the group. Large scale can sacrifice necessary intimacy.

Further, those of us at Brown who carry a responsibility to understand what is evolving and, ultimately, to articulate it sensitively need to know schools well — and any large number is impossible to know well. We can send out questionnaires and collect the predictable collectable data, but this is barely what we are about. The feel of a school, its morale, the subtle engagement of its students: these and analogous qualities have to be seen close up, on a regular basis. Fifty-two schools (our current number) is too much, given the size of our staff.

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***“The sooner we involve the overall hierarchy — working from the schoolhouse to the state house — the better.”***

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*Growth by subtraction.* Alas, we appear to be both too big and too small. What to do? Our current plan is to grow, but by *clusters* of schools, not by individual schools — a coalition of coalitions, each with its own regional staff. Put another way, we will increase our staff by means of regionally-based colleagues, folks associated with us who can support the schools in their areas, get to know them well, nurture and assist them, and let us know in detail what is evolving.

Consequently, with an eye toward our nascent regions, we will be admitting schools who wish to join as a cluster or a district, or schools in areas where clusters already exist. We will also be leaning toward representative “types” of schools. While the private and alternative are important sectors in American education and are well-represented in our current membership, critics will be asking whether or not the Coalition philosophy can work in the “average” high school. It is here that we need a stronger representation.

Discussions are underway with friends at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) — a Denver-based

educational policy studies group led primarily by state governors — to explore the progress of state-initiated and supported “coalitions.” There has been growing interest on the part of some state leaders in the Coalition approach; the prospects are promising.

Our friends at ECS remind us that any Coalition success will ultimately turn on state endorsement — regulatory support and political protection. The sooner we involve the overall hierarchy — working from the schoolhouse to the state house — the better, they counsel. A creative alliance with ECS, and through it with various state governments, would give us “scale” in the dimension that Holly Houston identified, but via an alliance with strong friends rather than trying to accomplish it ourselves. Regionalization, alliances: this seems a prudent way to proceed.

*Current Coalition Staff Projects.* Growth in the number of schools is fine, but we are intensely aware that it must be matched with a parallel deepening of our understanding of and practices for the key Coalition ideas. We are currently dividing our work at Brown into three units, referring to them loosely as the “hothouse,” the “garden” and the “toolshed.”

The “hothouse” is our research and development unit, focusing on the full elaboration of ideas and strategies that Coalition schools need: a rich sample and thorough explanation of Exhibitions; videotapes, print material and workshops on the pedagogy of student-as-worker/teacher-as-coach; and a series of budget-based exercises to help school planners experiment with emplacing the nine principles within “real” school settings. The hothouse’s work is exceedingly important, and major efforts are underway to raise the necessary funds for it.

The “garden” is centered on the schools themselves, the places where the new ideas are meant to take root. The Brown staff and our new regional colleagues will support and document the work on the new “regions” and underway in schools. Its shape is still evolving, affected both by our efforts to set up privately-financed “regions” and by our talks with ECS.

The “toolshed” provides the non-school-based services

that facilitate our work with schools. This unit will include our overall administration, our ethnography/documentation effort, our national communications efforts (including an expanded HORACE, with news from the schools), and my continuing contact with a small group of schools — the "Charter" group, perhaps somewhat expanded. Later issues of HORACE will bring updates on these projects and the meetings and workshops that they entail.

Two other small projects are underway. Thanks to the support of the Southwestern Bell Foundation, Professor Thomas James at Brown is supervising several case studies of the "politics" of Coalition school communities, these to be discussed at a conference next year and ultimately published. And thanks to the Johnson Foundation, and some supplemental support from the Southwestern Bell Foundation, Professor Fayneese Miller is organizing a conference to be held in early June at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, to bring together a few CES people with a number of leading experts on adolescence and adolescent development. We need always to be attentive to research that can affect our work.

All this activity swamps us at Brown. However, we knew our work together would have its unpredictable sides and that it would be evolutionary. Our "problems" of scale — too big and too small — arise from increasing interest in our collective effort and growing confidence that we may be on the right track. However much puzzlement they may cause us, they are cause for gratification.



Coalition  
of Essential Schools

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## Professional Development Activities

### Math-Science Workshop

This summer the Coalition will sponsor a week-long workshop for Math and Science teachers. The workshop will take place on July 17-22 at MASP/Milton Academy in Milton, Massachusetts. The primary focus of this workshop will be "Student as Worker," "Less is More" and "Exhibitions." Participants should be ready for a rigorous "hands-on" experience with opportunities to explore new topics and ideas in Math and Science as well as new pedagogical techniques. We also plan to bring in a few surprise experts to pique your curiosity about the field you teach. Contact Amy Gerstein for applications and further information.

### Mythos: A Workshop on School-Site Restructuring

The Mythos Workshop will help participants examine issues pertaining to school-site restructuring, working particularly to understand the interconnection of the philosophy, structure, and budget of the school. Schools will be invited to send teams of at least three, to include teachers and administrators. The goal of this hands-on workshop will be to help participants develop a sense of how their whole school functions and the skills required to direct change, thereby moving away from piecemeal decision-making. Participants will then be asked to develop plans for facilitating change in their own schools. The Mythos Workshop will begin on the evening of Tuesday, July 5 and will continue through Saturday, July 9, 1988, at Milton Academy in Milton, Massachusetts. In addition, there will be one follow-up session to this workshop, probably in early December.

### Upcoming Forum

The Coalition will host and sponsor a National Fall Forum in Providence early this fall. More information will be announced as plans are finalized.



Starting with the next issue of HORACE, Gary Obermeyer will be collecting news from both the charter and associate schools to be printed as a regular feature in upcoming issues of the newsletter.

## A LESSON FROM THE COALITION CURRICULUM BANK

The following "student-as-worker" unit is an excerpt from Dick Esner's contribution to the Coalition curriculum bank. For a complete account and syllabus, please contact Dick Esner at Brighton High School, Rochester, N.Y. Coincidentally, Dick's class appears in the soon-to-be-released Coalition video. We encourage all readers of *HORACE* to contribute to the curriculum bank.

A problem-based economics unit by Dick Esner (concepts considered include supply and demand, elasticity, and equilibrium)

### "Before" (traditional approach)

The class would typically be assigned appropriate chapters in the text with homework, consisting of several questions at the end of the chapters. I would "discuss" the and by calling on those who believed they knew the answers. The class would work with several graphs and tables while I worked through them on an overhead. The concepts would be "covered" in logical order, but in a vacuum (i.e., outside of economic problems giving rise to them). An objective test would be given which would determine the grade on that unit.

### "After"

An essential question is given to the class to work on for one month: What essential forces, principles and/or mechanisms operate in a market economy?

*Exercise #1: The first set of exercises for grappling with it is given:*

1. students are put into 3- or 4-person groups to begin answering the above question and to formulate further sub-questions;
2. they decide which questions, sub-questions and conclusions are relevant and which are not;
3. library research on the above question;
4. one class day spent in information sharing — discovering, in the process, that economic terms needed clarification.

Next, each student works out a solution to questions of survival in the business world (see below) and presents it to

his Board of Directors (6 or 7 students) in a final exhibition. Each Board hears 6 or 7 solutions and selects the "best" — at which point, the "winners" are presented to the whole class. Each solution is defended and the class chooses the "best" option.

### *Exercise #2: WILL YOU MAKE IT IN THE WORLD?*

1. What will you produce? How do you decide?
2. How will you deal with competition? What will help you get ahead of your competitors?
3. What price will you charge?
4. How will you attract labor? What will you pay them?
5. What size plant will you build?
6. What will you do with the profits?
7. How do you decide what resources to use? Which will be best suited?
8. What if no one buys your product? What is the effect on company? The workers?
9. How can you cut out the competition? What could happen to cost, salaries and quality if you succeed?

### *Exercise #3: WILL YOU SURVIVE?*

You are the president of a large company which is facing a major crisis. You have a large surplus of products which you are unable to sell. Will a cutback in production work? Your major task is to get your company into a good financial position. If you are successful, you will be given a large bonus. If you are unsuccessful, you will be fired. Prepare a presentation to your Board of Directors.

1. Market research shows that ...for every \$1 rise in price, 500 less of the product will be demanded. You want to supply 700 units for every dollar rise in price.
  - develop formulae for demand, supply, equilibrium
  - graph the company's position
2. If you are a monopoly, will this change the way you would solve this problem?
3. If you have a surplus—
  - What will happen to your workers?
  - What will happen to companies that produce complementary products?
  - If you are forced out of the business, what will happen to companies that produce substitute products?
  - What could this do to the entire economy?
  - How could the government help in this situation?