

HORACE

Affording the Essential School

A powerful learning tool for planners, Mythos effectively disarms the chief obstacle to major change—"We can't afford it"—and forces attention instead to the real subject, how a community wants its students to learn.

IF THE BASIC AIM OF AN ESSENTIAL School is that students learn to use their minds well, its success may hang most critically on the move towards a teacher-student ratio of 1:80. But fiscal and political realities can make this a daunting prospect. How can a school accomplish such ambitious change, as the Coalition of Essential Schools argues it can, without exceeding its current budget by more than 10 percent?

Using computer software called Mythos developed at CES over the last two years, school budget makers can now experiment with different ways to free up and reallocate funds to effect basic educational changes. The program aims to maintain a school budget's "bottom line" as any one of a number of reform tactics is plugged in. A powerful learning tool for planners, Mythos effectively disarms the chief obstacle to major change—"We can't afford it"—and forces attention instead to the real subject, how a community wants its students to learn.

The Mythos software takes the \$3.5 million budget of a real high school dubbed Alethes, and by reaching into selected budget areas, frees some \$400,000 for redistribution. It presents a number of possibilities for reallocating these funds—higher teacher salaries, more teachers, more administrative help for teachers, master teachers working with junior faculty, and

more. Each is an approach to realizing the Essential Schools set of nine common principles. At present, which of these approaches is most effective is an open question, the answer to which depends on more schools trying them. In the end, the tack a particular school takes may depend on what it judges it can achieve politically within its community.

Some of the moves with which the Mythos system now starts—like shifting responsibility for guidance and athletics to other areas entirely—are controversial. But any outright line item cuts, CES argues, are justified (and in some cases, compensated for) by how the money is used instead—for example, by making teams of teachers responsible for guidance of small groups of students. And no cut compromises the fundamental educational principles that drive the Essential Schools.

Still, if a school is unwilling to make such radical decisions at the start, CES offers an alternative "starting version" of Mythos. This one sacrifices fewer of education's sacred cows and achieves the same goals, while requiring an increase of 8.4 percent over the original budget—well within the Coalition's target range of under 10 percent.

How Mythos Works

Consider what happens, for example, when Alethes High School decides that its main priority in

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school reform is to raise teacher salaries by 25 percent. This plan can be played out using Version II of the Mythos model.

First, Alethes restructures its school into five "houses" of 270 students each. Class periods are lengthened, and teachers working in teams counsel and coach the same group of students in several subjects—making up for cuts in guidance, special needs, and attendance services. Students take over much of the school's upkeep, and athletics is increasingly supported by community booster clubs and user fees. The \$400,000 that is freed up allows Alethes to raise teacher salaries 25 percent, with only an additional 1.4 percent budget increase.

Impossible, the Alethes principal says; the community will never swallow such controversial budget redistribution. In response, we turn to the more conservative starting version of Mythos. The house system is still in place, but athletics, counseling, and custodial services remain in their traditional forms, and special needs is cut only slightly. Now in order to carry out its 25 percent teacher raise, Alethes will need to raise its original budget—but only by 8.4 percent.

Raising teacher salaries is just one scenario that can be played out using the Mythos software and the documents that accompany it. Another version lowers the student-teacher ratio even further by adding teachers but reducing some support services. Still another reverses this priority by having a smaller number of highly skilled teachers work with junior faculty who also provide some support services. Two versions give top priority to paying high salaries to master teachers who work with experienced and novice teachers. And one, sadly realistic, works with a school budget that demands a cut in per-pupil expenditure from \$2,600 to \$2,000.

A Stimulus to Planners

Mythos is being developed by Susan Follett Lusi and John Watkins, members of the Coalition's staff at Brown University, and tested in CES workshops. And though no schools have yet used it in a real-world situation—as a means to alter their budgets to accomplish sweeping change—Lusi calls the software a useful tool nonetheless. "It's a way of stimulating people's imaginations, to show them what they might be able to do," she says.

One recurring objection to the program is the extent to which it depends on politically controversial cuts to fund each version of change. (Athletics, some administrators complain as an example, is so central a priority in their communities that even the academic curriculum is organized around sports.) "We're working on different ways to cut and redistribute monies," Lusi says in response. But she notes that eliminating official funding for a program need not mean the program's demise. And she reminds schools that budget reallocations are just one useful way into a discussion of how to move towards the key Mythos goal, a 1:80 teacher-student ratio.

"Essential Schools sometimes have to make hard and unpleasant decisions in order to get to the point where teachers can work with smaller groups of students," CES chairman Ted Sizer warns. "But what monies can be reallocated in any school budget will vary from community to community, and Mythos so far has explored only a few of the options. You need less money for administration, for example, as schools get simpler in their schedules and structure. And having teachers teach more broadly across the disciplines is a swift and economical way to move to 1:80 and free more funds."

Those who have tried Mythos in CES workshops report varying results when they bring it back to their own school districts. "It's definitely not a program that can just take a school's numbers and plug them in," says George Simpson, chief deputy superintendent of the Louisville, Kentucky schools, who is encouraging principals in his district to join the Coalition. "It's more like learning the fundamental formulae in calculus. Principals can then apply them to their own real-world situations."

In Simpson's real world, principals already have authority to



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Information and Resources

For more information on Mythos, or for a demonstration diskette (the program runs on Apple Macintosh 512 and up, using Microsoft Excel), write Sue Lusi at the Coalition of Essential Schools, Box 1938, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912; or call (401) 863-3384.

For more information on Re:Learning, write or call Bob McCarthy at the Coalition of Essential Schools, or Beverly Anderson at the Education Commission for the States, 1860 Lincoln St., Suite 300, Denver, CO 80295, tel: (303) 830-3631.

automatically reallocate funds except in certain untouchable areas such as utilities and already contracted-for staff. No one in his district, Simpson believes, would be willing to cut athletics, which is already strongly supported by parents and boosters; and guidance is also rarely touched. Special needs is not entirely eliminated, though many students are integrated into mainstream classrooms; and custodial services are left alone.

Transition Period Essential

Still, Simpson is enthusiastic about the way Louisville has used Mythos principles to effect change. "We take the first two to three years just to set the tone, to develop a cooperative environment for change," he says. No reallocating of budget items goes on during that time; and seed money as well as additional staff is available to principals for use as they see fit during the transition period. "In my estimation," Simpson says, "it will take at least four to five years for any school operating under normal

conditions to make the transition."

Schools moving towards an Essential Schools philosophy do need extra time and money for the transition, the Coalition agrees—and more than is generated by the budget reallocations Mythos proposes. Some \$50,000 per year is a realistic estimate, says CES's Director of Schools Bob McCarthy, to pay for substitute teachers, summer planning sessions, visits to other schools, and workshops or symposia. Teachers and principals can use this period, he notes, to explore and understand the ideas behind the change and to plan how to carry it out.

Schools moving towards an Essential Schools philosophy need extra time and money for the transition—and more than budget shifts can generate.

Thomas Jones, who is principal of Brighton High School in Rochester, New York, suggests that the Mythos software is most useful to schools as a means of raising issues. Because Brighton has been on a modular schedule since the 1970s and already has a teacher-student ratio around 1:90, the school did not undergo a major transition when it joined the Coalition in 1987.

Basic Cuts Are Controversial

Based on his personal experience leading Brighton as both an entire and a partial Essential School, though, Jones has varying reactions to the moves proposed in Mythos's first starting model. He would be reluctant to ask teachers to take over the functions of counselors, because they lack training in guidance and because their work load, he says, would necessarily increase. And he does not view athletics as an extra. "We see it as

some of our most dynamic examples of coaching, both figuratively and literally," he says. But Jones does see the possibility of developing "an understanding, over a long period of time, that being a student in the school means giving something back to the school" in the way of upkeep. And though much of his special needs budget is state-mandated, Brighton has been "blending" its special needs students and regular students in common activities.

Larry Barnes, who administers an Essential School program within Paschal High School in Fort Worth, Texas, is skeptical about the Coalition's projection for a maximum 10 percent budget increase as a school moves towards Mythos. But Barnes, whose program is funded by a grant from the Tandy Foundation, has not had to face cuts in order to carry out reforms. Each of the five teachers in his program works an extra month each year, and Barnes is responsible for all individual student counseling, curriculum, scheduling, social activities, book-keeping, and the use of a discretionary fund. "You can do it with 15 percent more," he told the Washington Post. "It's an expensive program, but it's worth every penny."

Like several other administrators who think highly of the Essential Schools philosophy, Barnes is convinced that certain cuts, such as in special education and custodial services, are unrealistic in light of state requirements. "Dealing with the federal regulations and necessary paperwork would be endless,"

In Coming Issues:
**TEACHING IN THE
ESSENTIAL SCHOOL
and a report
on the Coalition's
FALL FORUM**

he says. "I don't want to die on that hill."

How to Sidestep Obstacles

For those already battling on the hill, CES's Sue Lusi points to help forthcoming from the new Re:Learning venture, which links Coalition schools with the Education Commission of the States in a common planning effort. Re:Learning, already adopted by five states, involves state and district governments from the start in a school's transformation, so that the most stringent requirements may be relaxed in order to allow an experimental program room to grow. For Coalition schools whose states do not belong to Re:Learning, CES encourages the formation of regional consortiums that could wield political bargaining power.

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Finally, the Coalition urges, educators must not regard state mandates as something to which they can respond only passively. Educators have a responsibility to put forth their own agenda for change, Lusi argues. "They must say to the states 'This is what we'd

like to see,'" she says. "The state is trying to guarantee quality by these requirements. The question is how to guarantee it without mandating all creativity out of the system." □

Write to Us . . .

HORACE welcomes letters from readers addressing issues in past or coming editions. Send letters to Editor, HORACE, Box 1938, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. Please include your name, address, and telephone number for factual verification. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity.

Getting to 1:80: Two Strategies

How is it possible to restructure a conventional high school so that the teacher-student ratio moves closer to the Essential Schools goal of 1:80, within budgetary constraints that rule out hiring massive numbers of new teachers?

One strategy, CES suggests, is to get every certified staff member to teach, if possible. If enough of these people are in the school, this is a concrete help, automatically bringing down the student-teacher ratio. If there are only a few, however, such a move may represent more of a symbolic commitment to getting to 1:80 than a really effective tactic.

In what is the key CES strategy, a school gets each member of its faculty to teach more than one subject to the same group of students. How does this work? Think of the one-room schoolhouse, where one teacher takes the same 30 students through an entire day, getting to know each student intimately. In contrast, in the

modern high school different groups of students are shuttled in and out of classrooms, so one teacher may see over 150 students in the course of a normal day. If instead of teaching five separate courses to five separate groups of students, a teacher combines the courses in some way during longer class periods, then each teacher sees fewer students in the day, yet the students are working in the same subject areas.

That's only the numbers story. This strategy also encourages teachers to shape the curriculum in an interdisciplinary way, providing a model for the generalist approach to knowledge that Essential Schools count as a basic tenet of quality education. Perhaps most important, material in interdisciplinary courses is taught at a more fundamental and integrated level, which directly furthers the aim of helping students learn to use their minds well.

One result of this is that teachers get to know their students better.

They can coach them for success at both academic and personal levels, providing guidance as students plan for their futures and keeping an eye out for problems like poor attendance. And as students work together, they come to know and learn from each other in a way that fosters a cooperative school spirit.

Obviously this strategy relies greatly on highly competent teachers functioning as generalists rather than specialists. But how do teachers feel about being asked to teach outside their specialization, or being asked to teach interdisciplinary courses? Does their education adequately prepare them for this challenge? Do they get enough support from their schools as their responsibilities change? And how do principals find teachers who are able to do this kind of teaching, or talk their current teachers into trying it? Our next editions invite comment on these questions, and explore related issues of teaching in the Essential School. □