

# HORACE

## Getting Started In an Essential School Program

***A good year of planning comes before the first day of classes. But how can the idea of a few interested people gain the support it needs to transform a school? How fast should that change take place? And must the whole school take part?***

FOR SCHOOLS BEGINNING TO move towards adopting the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, the first steps are often the most daunting. How can a few interested people gain the support of an entire staff for a change that will ultimately affect the whole school? How much money will it take to get started, and where will it come from? How should the idea be presented to the community? Perhaps most important of all, at what pace and within what scope should the change take place?

Most schools who have gone through this process agree that a good twelve months of planning should precede the first day of classes in an Essential School. To analyze how those months might best be spent, we spoke with people at Hope Essential High School in Providence, Rhode Island; Walbrook High School in Baltimore, Maryland; Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire; Parkway South High School in Manchester, Missouri; and several other schools at various stages and levels of the start-up experience.

### Envisioning Goals

Many veterans agree that the first step in planning an Essential School is arriving at a vision of the school's purpose—its expressly stated goals for what its students learn, how they learn it, even what kind of people they strive to become. Without such a basic vision, any

discussion of educational means will founder; with it, a school may survive an almost unlimited number of rough passages. Many schools, therefore, begin their planning year with thoroughgoing staff discussions, both to define an educational mission and to decide how it fits with the Coalition's common principles. A variety of decisions about the nature and structure of the program can emerge from these.

One way to shape such a discussion is to ask specifically what skills a student must display in order to graduate from the school. For example, if a school's goals include mastery in depth of certain key intellectual skills, and many of its students fall short of the literacy and numeracy needed to attain this, an intensive tutorial program might be structured into the program. Or if a school wants students to graduate with a sense of decency in relation to their peers and their community, it might structure a community service requirement into its program.

Beginning with a focus on the student's eventual mastery is one way to raise issues of how to teach best; but such issues can come up in other ways as well. Concern for a more personal connection between teacher and student, for instance, might drive a school's decision to lower teaching loads by adopting an interdisciplinary approach. Or the same result might be reached simply because a faculty has a

strong philosophical commitment to a unified or stripped-down curriculum. From these decisions, it is natural to consider team teaching or team planning as a structural possibility. In short, it is no accident that schools in the Coalition display widely divergent solutions to the challenges posed by its nine common principles. In fact, in almost no case do two schools develop along an identical path or wind up in the same place. Variations among Coalition schools are so essential as to almost qualify as a tenth principle.

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One predictable sticking point in these early developments, it appears, is the way in which a new Essential School program is seen within the context of the whole school. Is it to be a contained alternative program in a school with a traditional curriculum for the majority of its students? Or will it start as a small pilot project intended to encompass the entire school in time? The way in which a school answers this question appears to have a great deal to do with its success. Problems with schools that limit themselves to a "school-within-a-school" structure have become so common that the Coalition now asks applicants to pledge "whole-school" involvement over the long term.

The amount and kind of staging that goes into an Essential School's start-up varies greatly depending on what resources a school can

call on. In the case of Hope High School, the proximity of the Coalition staff and the involvement of the education department at Brown University encouraged a liaison early on among school administration, the teachers union, the university, and the city's central school department. Reading over the records of their early discussions one is struck by the sense of careful and detailed administrative negotiating from the earliest stages. At the highest levels, the city's school department talked with Brown about working together; various schools were considered as possibilities for an Essential School program; and as talks progressed, the teachers union wielded firm control over how such a plan might affect its teachers' rights. By the time the program took effect, the Hewlett Foundation had paid for a full year of planning time for head teacher Albin Moser and half-years for the four starting teachers. Brown's "clinical professors," also partly paid for by that grant, were working directly in the schools to support faculty as they practiced new teaching styles. And every aspect of the arrangement, from who would teach in the program to what would happen if one teacher took on another's responsibilities, was spelled out in a strong union contract.

Hope, then, approached its future as an Essential School in a way designed to let it thrive within a structure carefully specified in advance. At New Hampshire's Thayer High School, in contrast, principal Dennis Littky simply saw important areas of agreement between Ted Sizer's principles and the way his school was already working, and gave them free play to develop as they would among his staff. "Once we know what our goals are, my only criterion for evaluating the program is how well it meets those goals," says Littky. "If something we try doesn't work, we keep trying different approaches until it does." Once his staff was clear on

its philosophy of team teaching, for example, Littky encouraged any number of ways teachers could carry it out.

It is tempting to see Littky's confidence as a luxury of the small school—Thayer has only 300 students—with a strong principal who can make things work by virtue of personality and elbow grease alone. As long as Thayer's teachers are guided by Essential School principles, they have freedom to try almost any new idea to see if it works—a stance that encourages continual intellectual and even structural ferment, but which it is easy to imagine might founder in a larger system with more administrative restraints. Yet Littky's emphasis on his entire school working together in this way came about partly because Thayer is too small and its budget too modest for any split in its school vision to be practical. Moreover, Thayer's Essential School program has continued to grow against a backdrop of a sometimes divided school board and community. Littky keeps his momentum in part because his problem-solving technique does achieve the results he aims for. (Thayer's statistics for dropouts, attendance, and college admission have improved dramati-



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cally in the seven years since he was hired.) This has its own effect, in turn: teachers at Thayer, whose salaries are low by state standards, are said by one researcher to virtually ignore the union, taking their satisfaction from intense work on a shared mission in an atmosphere of camaraderie and mutual respect.

A small example here is revealing of an element common in many successful start-ups, in schools of many sizes. When Dennis Littky was first hired, he interviewed each one of Thayer's teachers to get their sense of the school. (Over the course of that first summer, he met with each student as well.) "I asked them what their dreams were and their hates, what was important to them about their classes," Littky recalls. "The one thing they had in common was that they all hated study halls." The first change Littky made was to abolish the study hall. This seemingly minor change made possible a chain of important structural consequences, including longer class periods, which in turn affected teaching styles, and so forth.

### **Who "Owns" the Change?**

The point is that teachers saw their own perceptions of what was good for students listened to and carried out on a program level. The change belonged to them, and so it began to work, laying the foundation so that the process could continue. This question of who "owns" the change is probably the central factor in a school's success or failure as it starts up a new program.

If the impetus for change comes from above—from a principal or superintendent, for example, or from state or city initiative—it runs the risk of being perceived as a "top-down" initiative lacking the grass-roots support of teachers and community. But early action like Littky's can clearly shift the initiative so that any real changes take place from the bottom up. When this happens successfully, the administration is viewed not as a

dictator or enemy but as a facilitating partner providing money, support, and even inspiration and incentives for change.

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Teachers at Walbrook High School in Baltimore, for instance, might have taken umbrage if their principal, Sam Billups, had instituted the sweeping measures he did in a different way. In the early 1980s Walbrook had all the problems of an urban school, and—prompted by a Ford Foundation grant and the encouragement of the Baltimore School Study Committee—Billups was ready to institute an Essential School program one grade at a time. Though he had already begun some moves towards change, such as ninth-grade clustering, the principal knew that his teaching staff would require substantial training and development before they were ready to take on the Coalition's challenges, and he worried that the new program would be seen as an elite for "the best and the brightest" teachers and students. To guard against this, he made *Horace's Compromise* and other readings available to every teacher on his staff. "We kept everyone informed on every move right from the start," he says. "We invited everyone to meetings and receptions. Some teachers volunteered for the program; in other cases, like in math, we had to talk them into it. And for our starting team we looked not for stars but for mid-career teachers already on our staff." As the Essential School's

facilitator Billups named the popular and energetic Marian Finney, whose job heading the health ed department was about to be phased out.

That first summer Billups and Finney gave a brilliant start to the lasting and innovative staff development for which Walbrook is now known. After an initial training period at Brown University with Coalition staff, teachers returned to Walbrook to practice their new theories in a two-week "lab school" specially created for 20 students who had to make up course work not completed the previous year. The "invitational" atmosphere and the excitement of a new program made the experiment a surprising success, culminating in a banquet with staff, students, and parents. The summer's work ended with two weeks of intensive faculty planning for the year ahead, and two teachers were sent to a national conference on critical thinking.

The summer institute, in shorter versions, has continued in the years since, as Walbrook moves more teachers and students into its steadily expanding Essential School program. But it is most instructive as an example of how Billups believes change must take place—by getting teacher after teacher, within the Essential School and outside it, to try out the concept of "student as worker" with the

### ***Write to Us . . .***

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committed support and training of the administration. The principal's obvious pride in his staff, and his cheerful expectation that his teachers will succeed at their task, creates an atmosphere of optimism and energy at Walbrook that suffuse the entire school. Ironically, Walbrook labors this year under multiple handicaps: last year the school was shut down on a day's notice for massive asbestos removal, and it functions this year with a truncated student population in a wing of another city high school far from most students' homes.

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Sam Billups's expectation of success on a larger scale is an intangible that seems to characterize many of the more successful Essential School programs, both at the faculty level and with students. To avoid the implication of failure that so often attaches to remedial programs, Walbrook goes out of its way to build remedial efforts into the basic structure of its program, for example, scheduling a tutorial time block at the start of every day as a matter of course. And though the school must submit to city and state mandates for skills testing, the school curriculum is arranged so that teachers can coach students to

pass all required tests as early as possible, and then get on with developing critical thinking skills. (At neighboring Forest Park High School, which is beginning plans to become a Coalition school this semester, teachers wear tee-shirts on testing day emblazoned with the passing score.) Billups also resists the temptation to extract "quick hard data" from his program as sole proof that it works. You can tell his Essential School students, he says, for their articulateness, their high self-concept, and their own high expectations of their teachers. "They're the ones that argue for half an hour when you try to send them home," he says with wry pride.

#### **How Students Are Selected**

But is the high self-esteem in successful Essential School students a result of the program, or simply a reflection of selection criteria that weed out students unlikely to succeed? At Walbrook, a random selection procedure guarantees against a biased selection; at Hope and many other schools, students must ask for inclusion. Any application requirement, some critics say, lowers the credibility of "success measures" like low dropout rates, higher test scores, and higher college admission rates when they are compared with those in a regular school program. "Of course the Hope Essential School has higher attendance and parent involvement," says Marcia Reback, president of the Providence teachers union. "The kids don't get into it if they have bad attendance records, and anything with an application is going to require a certain amount of parental attention to start with."

In Walbrook's pilot year students were selected by computer, though because of stringent state requirements special needs students were not included. ("I see no reason the program couldn't handle them," Billups says, "if the state would let us.") The second year,

some students who especially requested the program were included along with the random selection; and in the third year Billups simply took all the ninth graders assigned by the city to his new location in the asbestos shakeup. "Some of them may not have fit in initially," he says, "but they're coming around. And no one views this as an elitist program." Because of this approach, Walbrook can point to its phenomenally low dropout rate in the Essential School with confidence that the program has earned it. "We're working within a family here," Billups says. "If a student is missing, someone misses him. I've had cases where one student talked another into coming back to school."

When students must volunteer to join an Essential School program, some schools find, it tends to attract those who are not doing well in the "regular" program. Students who have already been earning top grades in a more traditional system, it seems, are sometimes threatened by the prospect of working in a scheme where there are no "right answers" to guarantee good marks.

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It is easy enough to imagine the scenario that principal Craig Larson describes at Missouri's Parkway South High School, where teachers volunteered for an Essential team only to find themselves in a demanding program skewed towards



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at-risk students without having chosen that task.

Larson addressed this problem by moving to computer selection of students and deemphasizing the separateness of the Essential School. When teachers see Coalition principles as freely available for all to try, he says, they work together better and do not see each other in terms of conflicting interest groups. Like Billups, then, Larson encourages all his teachers to involve themselves in new methods like teaming, exhibitions of mastery, and so forth. "We have definitely learned the value of open discussions," he says.

### **Dealing with Resistance**

How teachers react to a new Essential Schools program, of course, also depends on a range of other factors. The quality of the existing atmosphere in the school and the community is critical, for example. If a school has a history of bad relations among teachers, administration, parents, or school board, it starts off with several strikes against any new reform strategy. Compounding this may be a teaching staff that has seen reforms—and principals—come and go while they labor on in the

classrooms. "Teachers can get pretty tired of experiments in education," says Providence union leader Marcia Reback. "No wonder they sometimes have the attitude of 'Wake me up when it's over.'"

That problem is certainly at the heart of why Essential Schools proponents, like all political organizers, believe their programs must have strong grassroots support to succeed. One striking attribute of schools like Baltimore's Walbrook and Forest Park, where staff involvement appears broad, spirited, and wholehearted, is a sense that everyone involved has a deep stake in the results. When they decide that personal satisfaction or even survival is the prize, resistance gives way to energy and pride.

Dennis Littky, who knows quite a bit about community resistance from a searing period of turmoil over his leadership in his small New Hampshire community, addresses these issues with the forceful pragmatism of a grassroots organizer. "The perception of the school by the community," he argues, "is just as important as what we're actually doing." As he launched his program at Thayer High School, Littky held weekly coffees for townspeople to tell him ("without letting them degenerate into too much complaining") what they thought of the school. "My aim was to make *them* feel as responsible for the school's success as I am," he says. "That way, if it fails, it's not just my failure."

Littky is continually developing new ways to build that same sense of accountability and ownership among his staff and students. Over the year he likes to meet weekly for several hours, for example, with each one of his thirty teachers; he visits every class twice a week; and he often goes through a teacher's entire day with him. Once in a while he schedules a day of open office hours for students to talk with him. Every Friday he writes an informal memo to his staff, ruminating on current develop-

ments and listing what's planned for in the week ahead. And to start the last staff meeting he gave each teacher a bound "blank book" and asked them to write in it weekly for fifteen minutes about anything they chose to, for him to respond to in writing.

### **Dealing with Change**

One point of all this groundwork, of course, is that a program might continue even if its initial leader leaves. This has proved to be a stumbling block for some Coalition schools where, for example, an enthusiastic principal or superintendent is replaced by a new one with no personal investment in the Essential School. Contrariwise, a strong program that was initiated and built from the bottom up can actually gain strength from the advent of a new leader. The only generalization possible is that solidarity at the teacher level—success in empowering those who were not already articulate and powerful—seems as critical as committed leadership to the survival of a program in crisis.

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Crisis is where many Coalition schools are finding themselves, perhaps necessarily, as they enter the third year of their movement towards change. Sometimes this results from the inevitable and often politically hot question of how far-reaching the Essential School program will be within a

school—whether it will continue to include only some students and teachers, or expand to comprise them all. (Several Coalition schools face faculty votes on this question right now.) In other cases, the key question is money; many new Coalition programs get their start with private grants, and are expected to move towards tax-supported status after start-up. In a few schools, a faculty divided over questions of elitism, the allocation of time, the question of electives, or other knotty problems contributes to an atmosphere in which the

entire project may die a-borning.

Dennis Littky's approach towards failure reflects his expressly stated "bias towards action" in getting a show on the road. "If you're working within a philosophy you've all developed together," he says, "so-called failure is no threat. The data isn't the point; the philosophy is. You've just got to find another way to get it to work." For just that reason, he predicts problems for any school that splits its mission between two or more philosophies. At Thayer, interestingly, joining the Coalition solved one of Littky's own start-up problems, by helping him get grants to pay for training and development. The same thing may be accomplished when a school joins the Re:Learning initiative in its state, as Hope High School has just done in a faculty vote to consider its future direction. "This is a matter of a school deciding as a whole what the whole school will be," says its principal, Paul Gounaris.

Whatever its source, money is a powerful element of a start-up; the Coalition recommends budgeting at least \$50,000 in funds for time, travel, and resources for the planning year alone. But Sam Billups warns against judging a program too harshly by its costs in the start-up period. "If we staff the Essential School the way we want to, it's going to cost," he says. "But if we can keep more people in school, we can get more state funding as a result." Funding at the local, state, and federal level is cost effective, he argues, simply because his program works to help students succeed in school and in the world. The same might be said of local involvement by business and industry; in some ways, private grants from local sources may indicate just the kind of broad community backing that keeps a program's momentum up.

### How Fast to Go?

Just what speed that momentum achieves is a matter of some debate among Coalition schools. Hope's

Paul Gounaris likens his school's process to a game of Pacman: the Essential School started with a group of students that swallows a larger group, continuing that way until the whole school is contained by the Essential program if the faculty so votes. That is more or less the procedure Walbrook is following, too, although Sam Billups sees a whole-school involvement as a more immediate (and less controversial) prospect than does Gounaris. At Thayer, Littky's approach is both faster and slower than most: an uncompromising centralist about the core values he holds dear, he is willing to tolerate a meandering path to get to them.

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And at Parkway South, principal Craig Larson warns against trying the school-within-a-school model he started with, because of its danger of divisiveness. Like Littky, he advocates team-building from the start, involving all faculty early on in an ongoing discussion of issues such as personalization, teachers as coach, and exhibitions of mastery. "Talking about ideas like this enables you to raise all the issues without raising red flags on matters like electives or budget," he says. Larson also emphatically advocates getting a broad range of students involved from the start; he began his start-up process with "school improvement teams" made up of students, teachers, and parents.

## Information and Resources

For more information on the programs referred to in this issue, contact the following people:

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### Re:Learning: From Schoolhouse to Statehouse

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"The worst mistake you can make," warns one principal who replaced the original Essential School principal in a Coalition school, "is to mandate instant change. We saw this in the open classroom era—it didn't matter whether teachers wanted it or understood it, they were going to do it. You have to allow time to bring people along." At his school, he instituted a comprehensive staff development program that included all teachers. "We have a lot of people who agree with the principles but not with how our program here was originally imposed from above," he says. Visits to other Coalition schools, he adds, go a long way towards persuading the resistant. "It's very convincing when you see it in practice," he says.

Whatever their start-up styles, all agree that a planning year is crucial—and that all such planning, like staff development, must be paid for, not voluntary. But once "E-day" is reached, how fast a program evolves appears to depend in large part on the particular dynamics of the situation—the push and pull exerted by a strong or uncertain leader, an enthusiastic or apprehensive faculty, a funding source with deep or shallow pockets. A fledgling program may eventually stand either by the force of people pulling at it from all sides, or by the power of people holding it up consciously in support. How long it lasts, in the end, may turn out to rest on that difference as well. □

### ***In Coming Issues:*** **SCHEDULING THE ESSENTIAL SCHOOL**

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## **RE:LEARNING: New Help in Getting Started**

SCHOOLS OR DISTRICTS THAT operate in relative isolation have particular difficulty winning the financial, political, and philosophical support they need to think seriously about educational redesign. At the same time, helping schools to find and maintain support is a growing administrative problem for the Coalition staff at Brown, as the Coalition expands and the number of schools requiring such assistance increases.

A 1988 initiative called "Re:Learning: From Schoolhouse to Statehouse," which developed in response to these needs, aims at winning state-level funding for schools interested in Coalition ideas. At the same time, it creates administrative structures through which Coalition staff can maintain better contact with what goes on in the field.

The Re:Learning initiative is a combined effort of the Coalition, the Education Commission of the States (a Denver-based, nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact that helps governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education), and interested states. The initiative advocates a bottom-up process of system-wide educational redesign. A state makes this possible by agreeing to legislate funds and other kinds of support so that change can be envisioned and carried out by those most directly involved in the day-to-day realities of students' learning—namely, the teachers themselves. Recognizing the uniqueness of different schools' staffs, students, communities, and histories, the Re:Learning initiative calls on each school to consider how the nine basic Coalition principles apply in its own case, and empowers the school to realize the vision that results.

### **How Re:Learning Works**

But how does Re:Learning actually work in the real world? The case of Delaware, one of five states to participate this year (along with Arkansas, Illinois, New Mexico, and Rhode Island), is instructive. In fall 1987, a representative from ECS met with the governor, his education adviser, the president of the state board of education, and the state school superintendent to explain the initiative and discuss Coalition principles. As a result, \$210,000 was written into the governor's proposed budget, earmarked for supporting development in up to seven schools. Meanwhile, a network of advocates formed including representatives from the University of Delaware, officials within the Department of Public Instruction, and other state-level education officials. Along with Coalition staff from Brown, this group began to consider various administrative issues, such as the position of state coordinator for the schools to be selected, and the selection process itself. At the same time, meetings were held with representatives of the teachers association, the PTA, and all other groups that would be affected if the initiative were adopted, to discuss the nature of Re:Learning and win further support. As a result of over six months of intensive planning, when the Finance Committee finally passed the proposed \$210,000 on the second vote, the state education system was well prepared to welcome and support schools interested in joining the initiative.

Of the four schools eventually chosen—two high schools, a middle school, and an elementary school—some responded directly to an invitation that went out to all schools, while others were asked to  
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## RE:LEARNING

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join for more specific reasons, such as proximity to the university, or in order to achieve better demographic balance. Each school was given \$30,000 and asked to match this with \$10,000 in new funds, the resulting monies to be used as the school saw fit to support staff discussions and development activities.

After only five months, the effects on the schools are already visible. Consistent with Re:Learning philosophy, each has developed its own approach to rethinking teaching and learning. Steering committees, faculty-wide involvement, reading and study groups, travel to other Essential Schools, and a variety of other development strategies have formed. At one school the state acted as facilitator

by arranging an exemption from the state code so that a normal instructional day could be devoted to staff training instead.

Different visions are emerging from the schools, partly because schools are at different stages of the process. "Some schools are farther along than others in reaching consensus about goals," reports state coordinator Joe Fitzpatrick. "But this is a process that cannot and must not be rushed." In his view, when teachers focus on getting students to use their minds well, and realize that they can have power in their own classrooms, "the moment will come when they see the necessity for changing the way a lot of things are done." In the meantime, simply the ongoing staff discussion is generating changes in how teachers teach.

Helen Foss, the governor's education adviser, reports that the

principals of all four schools are astonished by the changed atmosphere. In something as prosaic as "the quality of lunchroom talk," she says, discussion of educational objectives and methods is now routine. The "lunchroom index" reflects teachers' widespread perception that what they think and say matters. "Just in this first year of studying and thinking, it's extremely impressive to hear the teachers talk," Foss says. "When they start saying things to you like, 'For the first time, I really feel like a professional,' well . . ."

In its first year, the Re:Learning initiative seems to be working well. The state of Delaware has allotted an additional \$165,000 to bring new schools in, and on a national level several new states have expressed interest. The initiative may prove to be a powerful and satisfying way to get started. □



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