

HORACE

What Students Say About Essential Schools

When teachers stop lecturing and start treating students as agents of their own education, the classroom suddenly becomes a place kids want to be. Mostly they talk about how a more personal involvement with each other and their teachers lends pride and energy to their work.

I AM LOST AT PARKWAY SOUTH High School. The carpeted corridors make their own logical maze around and up and down the stairways, and bright wall graphics mark the way towards the cafeteria, the school nurse, the library, the pool—I should be able, I tell myself, to find my way around. But in the din between the bells, as students swirl and settle into their classrooms, I am humbled and amazed at once by their easy, confident clatter; this intimidating complex is their world to own. I can feel only too well what it must be like, coming in here as a ninth-grader on the first day of school. You can be done for in an instant here, if your sense of direction, like mine, is at all unsure.

Back in the central lobby, where principal Craig Larson's glass-walled office suite anchors my directional sense again, a film crew from the local television station is arriving for the day. The school is in the news, for better or worse; a group of parents has protested to the school board about Parkway's policy of eliminating separate honors classes in English and social studies in the ninth grade. Larson takes it as an opportunity; impeccable as always in suit and tie, his countenance serene, he is ready for the first of the interrogations on TV and radio that will follow. No, he explains, advanced students are not being stripped of

their challenges; they will simply mingle in class as in real life with others of different abilities. As in life, they will take challenges to a more advanced level the more capable they are—and in doing so, will motivate and support their fellow students of every stripe. One learns best, he points out, when one must explain something to another person, work in a group with others, stand before people to demonstrate something in a clear and interesting way. These things are the basis of what the Coalition of Essential Schools is aiming for; and Parkway South, rather than limiting its Essential School program to the 100-per-class system it has practiced for the last three years here in this St. Louis suburb, is bringing it now into the mainstream of school life.

This year Parkway's seniors are back to standard 52-minute classes; no longer are some led by the special teams of four teachers that shepherded them through sophomore and junior years. Though this is partly so they might take senior-year electives, it also can be laid to a new philosophy at Parkway South that every class can be "essential"—teachers are being encouraged to form interdisciplinary teams as they themselves see fit. Because he believes such change cannot and should not be imposed from above on the 1830 students and 120 teachers here, Larson is negotiating

a delicate transitional step—"one step backward," as program coordinator Patrick Conley puts it, "for two steps ahead."

But the students who piloted Parkway's Essential program are worried about the change, and it only takes a day in the labyrinth of these halls to see why. In groups of three or four or a dozen all day, they tell me what they fear: that teachers will not know their names any more; that the other students in their classes will be strangers to them again; that they will lose the precious sense, built day after day over the past three years, that they matter personally to their teachers and to each other. They have not been lost in their school since freshman year—not in the halls (which any fool can learn to negotiate in a day or two, they tell me kindly) and not in their classrooms either.

This is a big suburban school with offerings as broad as if it were a junior college; 90 percent of its graduates go on to higher education; 20 percent of its students are bused in from the city to achieve a racial mix. But I heard the same story from the mostly black students at Walbrook High School, where in a basement corner of a forbidding concrete fortress on a downtown Baltimore hill the first 80 or so Essential School graduates are conducting their final exhibitions every day now. And I heard it on the small and well-groomed campus of Whitfield School, a mid-level private school in the St. Louis hierarchy of educational privilege. In these three very different settings—representative in many ways of the range that the Coalition of Essential Schools embraces—I met with students for several days, privately and in small groups, asking them how they felt about their experience in the Essential School. Their voices were refreshingly frank and free, their opinions for the most part unmarred by the jargon of educational reform. But the message came through clearly,

time after time: Of all the Essential School's "nine common principles," personalization is the most important to kids.

"They Know Who You Are"

Billie Lawrence is a Parkway South senior; her laugh is infectious as she pokes fun at the attitudes she held for the first year she was in Parkway South's Essential School program.

"I was horrible at the beginning of last year," she says gaily. "I would just sit back and laugh and say to my friends how I didn't care about school. Inside I knew, though, that my teacher was really teaching *me*. By the end of the year, when it was time to do my projects and bring my parents in and pull it all together, I really cared about it. Truthfully, that's what brought me back to school this year—I wanted them to see me change."

The teacher she is talking about is Sally Hunter Williams, whose Contemporary Issues class this year includes many who were part of the Essential School program in Parkway South's first two years. Williams was one of the Coalition team that worked with these students in their cohort of 100 during their junior year, and they speak of her with obvious affection, loyalty, and

"One time a couple of us cut school for a day or two, and every teacher called my house! It was kind of hard to skip." (Thanh Nguyen, Parkway South)

trust. "She has a different approach for every kid," Billie says. "With one she might be stern, and with somebody else she might get down and beg him. She's like a mother to us—if you're working on a project she'll call to see if you have everything you need, or she'll bring in an article that relates to it for you. One summer she called every one of us on the phone just to see how everything was going."

Students were selected for Parkway's Essential program at random, by computer, though they also might request or refuse it; and like many other students I talked with, Billie thought at first that they had been chosen because they "needed extra help." But the impression that the Coalition is for dummies dies fast when they get in the classroom, students say.

"We're comfortable around the teachers. Once I leave here there will always be a relationship between them and myself. We can always go to them." (Nathan Scovens, Walbrook)

"The work is not easier," says Mark Gray, a senior who traveled last year to the CES Fall Forum, one of the few educational conferences where students are invited to attend and participate. "But it is more personal, one on one—the teachers know who you are and the work is set up around the students, not around the teacher. I got a lot better grades than I ever did before."

How Hard Do They Work?

About grades, with all their power to sort and rank, students wax voluble in these groups. The resentment is palpable as they trade stories of how they got through their conventional classes before their Coalition experiment began. It is May, I remind myself; these are seniors chafing at their bonds, counting the days until graduation. Still, they are experts already in their own oppression: they can cite chapter and verse of what a bad class is like, and they speak with warmth of their reprieve.

"I was in all honors classes my freshman year," says Parkway senior Tammy Bateman, one of those who piloted the Essential program in tenth grade. "I don't remember anything I had that year."

All I did, I would go to class, do my work and turn it in. I would just do enough so that I could get a good grade and that was it."

In fact, most students find that their work in mixed-ability Essential classes is at least as challenging as what they did in classes tracked for honors. "I used to sleep in my honors classes," says Monique Huntley, with a touch of hauteur. "As long as I studied for the test, I got by fine." An honors class is no guarantee of the student's engaging with ideas, they insist to my skeptical questioning; in many cases, it is even more competitive, more centered around test-taking and grades. "In my honors class this year there's no personal relationship with the teacher," says another senior. "The teacher gives you notes, he lectures, you copy things off the board, you take the test. At the end of the period you use the last few minutes to talk to your friends."

In their Essential classes, honors students contract for extra work—more readings, more elaborate presentations, peer tutoring—that will qualify them for an honors grade. At least one senior girl told me she was disappointed by that

system. "It might have been good for the people I was supposed to be helping," she says. "But to me it just seemed like busywork. We just had to do more than the others, but we didn't really learn as much as before."

"I was worried about that when I started in the program," says Tammy Bateman. "But for me the honors contracts worked out fine. We had to do our presentations before the others did, and they had to be more elaborate. The others would get motivated by us, and we benefit because we had to read more and do more. I still got the quantity, but I think the quality was more than in my straight honors classes."

Exhibitions as Motivation

"In tenth and eleventh grades, we couldn't sleep any more," Monique adds. "We had to stay awake, or we would miss something." The reason, the group decides, is that their Coalition classes were centered around activities, rather than note-taking. When they had to prepare in small groups for presentations, they say, the stakes went up.

"On a test you can get socked with some little detail you might have had three months ago and then do badly on the test. In a presentation you can show what you do know." (Twelfth-grader, Parkway South)

"You don't know you're working harder," says Robert Huitt. "You want to." Senior Thanh Nguyen agrees. "If you're just studying for a test, no one has to know if you get it wrong," he says. "But if you have to get up there and present something, you don't want to be mumbling something you don't know about in front of everybody."

Moreover, students say, they often learn more from each other in

"You're tired in school anyway, and if the teachers don't have energy, if they just lecture you, you have less energy from the start." (Tammy Bateman, Parkway South)

discussions than they do from the teacher. "Everybody has a different viewpoint on things," says Tammy Bateman. "If you listen to what everyone in the class thinks, you have to come up with your own view." This is similar to what happens at test time, she notes, and so substituting classroom exhibitions for tests is fairer to students. "People have different ways of thinking," she argues. "On a test, you have to be thinking the way the teacher is thinking, even down to how she words the question. If you happen to be thinking from another perspective, that's your problem. A presentation gives you the chance to show how you interpret facts."

Such demonstrations of mastery (see HORACE, Volume 6, No. 3) are fairer than tests in another way, these kids point out: they make it not only hard but "unnecessary" to cheat. "In most classes your aim is to get in there, find out as much as possible about the test, and then get out," says one girl. "In Coalition you don't have a reason to do that, because you don't do the presentation until you really know the stuff and you're ready." Another student adds, "There's an incentive not to cheat. In history, you'll have to read some interesting pages, not too many, and the teacher lets you write down notes on an index card and take it into the test. You hand it in with the test, so he can see what you got out of it." The group falls again to discussing Ms. Williams's class, where "the class isn't built around the test," one girl says. "We just discuss something until she says, 'Is everybody ready for the test?' and if not, we stay on it longer." Besides, senior Mike



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Editor:
Kathleen Cushman
Managing Editor:
Susan Fisher

Kechnast points out, "It's about trust. If the teacher trusts you, you would feel guilt, if nothing else."

Will They Still Be Special?

So what's it like to be in class these days? I ask students at Parkway South, where the special "Coalition program" has been phased out in favor of integrating Essential School pedagogy into every class throughout the school. Here at least, seniors who were in the special program for the previous two years are feeling its loss. Now that periods are back to their shorter length and the team approach is

optional, they say, the intimacy they experienced through the earlier structure is diminished. That sense of belonging to a constant group of manageable size, with teachers who knew each other and each student, was foremost in students' priorities at every one of the schools I visited.

In practical terms, eliminating the special structure for the senior year means more electives can be scheduled in, points out Parkway's coordinator Patrick Conley, and some of these may be necessary to graduate. But seniors say they miss the longer time blocks

that allowed them to spend more time on a subject, to explore its relation to other areas of knowledge, and—they emphasize this benefit consistently—to take field trips together as a group.

Their travels—to tour a nuclear power plant, to visit a college, to teach arts and crafts to younger children in a camp—were "educational," they say, tying in to their schoolwork in different ways. But it is also clear that the field trips symbolize the unity this group feels so keenly, and that for them this unity plays a key role in the Essential program's success. Even if

One Student's View: "This all sounded too simple"

In many classrooms in many schools people have ideas on the way that schools should be run. Over generations our ancestors have developed ideas on what a good learning environment is. This idea is strange because it has never been questioned. And why not? Japan is leaving the U.S. behind in productivity as we speak. Why does this happen? Some people believe that we are focusing on the wrong thing in our educational system. What I have just stated is pretty generic. Most people have already heard about this problem, and we ask ourselves the question: "What do we need to do to make the U.S. educational system more competitive?" Well, some people claim that smaller classrooms and different expectations of the student and teacher are necessary. This all sounded to me too simple.

At first glance these suggestions for a new educational system looked good on paper. I was a little skeptical about this. I would be much more willing to accept it if it were proven to me in actuality. I did not think this could be done easily. Because subjects like chemistry and algebra are so direct and straightforward it would be hard to carry out a different relationship between students and teachers, since classes like these cannot be taught any other way except by good explanations, examples, and hours of patient listening. English or history, on the other hand, I believed would not have the same kind of trouble. These classes seem to be a little more subjective. The teacher can give the students more freedom to mingle among themselves about questions, a book or story, or what should have been done or should be done about happenings in the world. But the other aspect to be considered was will the students use this freedom to their benefit.

This was all proven wrong to me when I saw the system work, and work well in a class of mine. It didn't work well at first. It did take some time. The instructor took the attitude of the observer. "The less I do for the students in problem solving for their assignments, the

better off they are. They need to talk to themselves and their friends because that is who they will always have in order to answer their questions in life to come." When this was given to the kids, it really confused them. They had no idea of what the teacher wanted. They couldn't distinguish between what was relevant to English and what was not. They just did not understand the system which was given to them. And, you can't blame them. If Albert Einstein had been given a calculator nothing would have stopped him. But unless you taught him to use it, all it was was a \$3 piece of plastic.

Because the plan had not been worked out it fell on its face. The instructor backed up and forgot about English for about six weeks. During this time he subliminally showed the class what his goals were. One by one everything started to fall in place. The role of the teacher and the role of the student and the role of the work became clear. Once this huge ball started rolling, nothing stopped it. It couldn't stop. It could slow down, but never grind to a stop, which I feel happens quite often in other classrooms. Everyone takes such pride in what they are doing. Grades are exceptional.

The reason that so much pride is taken is because the subjects that are used matter. I'll give an example. If someone asks you a question and you know the answer, you are no smarter than before. If you ask someone a question because you don't know the answer and they give you an answer back, you probably won't remember because you don't care. If you cared, you would know the answer. But let's say you thought up a question for yourself. The question must matter to you because you thought it up. So, no matter where you get your answer, whether someone gives it to you or you find it out yourself, chances are you won't forget it. This is the theory I think is used in this English class, and should be executed in more classes, where feasible.

—John Brunjes, eleventh grade, Whitfield School

classroom techniques do gradually change to a more student-centered approach, they worry that this aspect will be lost. To work best, they suggest, perhaps other teachers and students will have to be teamed in more of the 100-student groups that marked the first few years. The school has no plans to impose such a structure just now, but teachers are being encouraged to propose and design teams for themselves, and the arrangements will be supported when schedules are designed.

Interestingly, students are skeptical that wholesale Coalition-style teaming would fly at Parkway South. Those who have been successful in a more traditional system will be suspicious, they warn. "You hear 'individual attention' and you think you're going to be in a room all by yourself with none of your friends," says one student. "You worry about being different. But for us, the kids who did want it kind of pushed the reluctant ones. And almost everybody came back. We had no dropouts last year in the Coalition group."

"They listen to us all the time, to what we have to say. They were trying something new, too, just like we were. It takes time; everything takes time." (Twelfth-grader, Parkway South)

At Walbrook, too, a markedly fervent group spirit infuses the classes who have gone through their high school years as part of an Essential School team. Coordinator Marian Finney—so beloved by her students that she sometimes has to barricade herself and other teachers in for a private lunch ("where we can talk about the kids," she says)—laughs at how possessive the seniors have become about their program. But the degree of individual attention these students get is

no laughing matter at Walbrook, which for two years has shared the gigantic structure that is Southwestern High School while its own building is stripped of asbestos. With almost no windows and with security guards at the doors, this building makes Parkway South look like a country club; in it, Walbrook Essential School coexists with Walbrook "regular school" as well as with Southwestern. Next year, Sam Billups will become coordinating principal for both Southwestern and Walbrook, and because he was the guiding spirit behind the original Walbrook Essential School, some in the program speak eagerly of the changes that may follow. As at Parkway South, though, the students are worried—and it's about the very same thing: Might they lose the precious intimacy that has seen them through an Essential schooling?

"The Coalition is like a family," says senior Dianne Goodman. She is a sturdy girl with a determined and authoritative air; in ninth grade she wanted to drop out of school because it was so hard, she says, but "Ms. Finney told me, 'You can be something, or you can be nothing at all.'" Now, she says, she can go to a teacher for help with anything, academic or personal. "We're here to learn," she says, "but we also have fun, because we know each other. They teach us more than math and all; they teach us common sense and common courtesy, and we learn."

It's hard to get Walbrook students to say anything at all critical about their program; they bring a devotion to their teachers that sweeps like a fresh breeze through this windowless concrete basement. And when you look around at the walls, the blackboards, the ways students talk with teachers, it is easy to see that Essential School principles have become the air that this school-within-a-school breathes. "Essential questions"—about love and honor, about justice

and power—are posted in almost every classroom. In Marian Finney's office the blackboard list of who has been accepted to what colleges is daily updated. In the classroom where we meet I admire an elaborate Egyptian frieze, complete with hieroglyphics, designed and painted by the toughest group of young men you might find on any street corner. You did this? I ask them around the table, amazed. How? They look at me with mingled pride and scorn. *Research*, they say.

They Expect Success

The expectation of success, after their four years at Walbrook, comes through again and again as I sit around tables with these students who talk with animation of what their program means to them. "It's designed for us," says Nathan Scovens, an articulate senior who was assigned to the Essential program "so I wouldn't get lost" when he moved back to Baltimore from Texas three years ago. "The teachers don't let you just sit back; they don't settle for less, because they know you from the first day when you walk in."

"And the students don't let you either," says U'Vonda DeLoatch. "If you get a 70 on something, they'll see it and they'll say, You can do better than that. It's not just the teachers pushing you, it's your peers too." In the first years of the program, she remembers, there was a required daily tutorial hour before school; but the logistics of being housed at Southwestern has made that temporarily impossible, and

"One hour is not enough time to run a class where you have projects. Two hours is really good—everybody has time to talk to the teacher, have them see what you are doing." (Chris Kinder, Parkway South)

students say they miss it despite a long lunch hour in which they can get help.

Though as at Parkway South they were mostly selected for the program at random, the Walbrook Essential kids clearly regard themselves as superior to the rest of the school by now. "From the ninth grade we're put in the position where we're expected to do better than the other kids," says junior Lamontec Briggs. The group agrees that this is partly because "we get more coaching than the regular kids," and that "everybody thinks we get more advantages, like field trips." But like the Parkway South students I spoke with, they hotly defend the educational nature of their group trips. "Even if we go to a movie, we have to come back and write about it!" said one boy.

Their pride in the results is obvious. "When we go out to compete against other schools, Walbrook wins things," says Dianne Goodman, "but Walbrook Essential *cleans up!*" All of the ten seniors around the table with her say they will go to college next year, and many have won scholarships or received city-wide academic achievement awards. Moreover, says junior Latanya Robinson, "There's no such thing as a nerd in the Coalition. If you're doing your best and you do well, everybody thinks it's cool." On the contrary, a friend puts in: "If you do something and you *don't* get the credit, you get mad for yourself and for the rest of the group."

So what can go wrong in an Essential program, in Walbrook students' eyes? They have a teacher

"Some people don't like learning that way. They've been taught to learn in a more structured situation: lecture, notes, there's the teacher, here's the class." (Angie Gunn, Parkway South)

shortage this year, they complain; some of their classes have up to 35 students. Working in small groups isn't always easy, one says, especially "if the people within the group don't know how to do it--if you just get thrown in to sink or swim." Sometimes the longer periods begin to wear on, a few students say; but the fact that they meet on alternate days makes up for it. "We get attention--sometimes *too much!*" one senior gripes cheerfully; if you skip school, someone notices right away. Still, prying suggestions for change out of the forty-odd students I spoke with at Walbrook was a tough proposition; more than half of one group of seniors declared that they would want to come back and teach at a school like this some day. "We've been together for four years, and we have a sense of pride," says Nathan Scovens. "We can't be defeated."

What About the Small School?

At Walbrook, the Essential School approach clearly has given direction and pride to a student population that otherwise might well be passed over in our educational system. At Parkway South, it has managed to reduce the strains that a very big school, no matter how privileged its students, can put on kids. But what of a school like St. Louis's Whitfield School, where students already accustomed to the personal scale and individual attention of a private-school education are encountering the shift in pedagogy that Essential Schools espouse?

Whitfield students notice the change right away, they say—in the English classes of teacher Mike McGlew, the social studies classes of Billy Handmaker, the science classes of Anne Chorley. They describe with alacrity the difference between a "read-and-regurgitate" classroom approach and a student-centered one.

"They're not trying to lecture you and tell you what to think,"

"People are used to reading something out of a book, or having the teacher explain something. But here they really teach you how to learn it, not just memorize it." (Debbie Becker, Whitfield)

says Anna Giuliani, a senior at Whitfield. "They're trying to get you to think for yourself, to develop and support your own ideas." Whitfield's small size, she says, contributes to the success of that method—few classes have more than ten students—but it could work as well in a class of 25 students. "We had to spend a day in English class at the beginning of the year just learning how to run a class like that—how to have a discussion without interrupting each other," she says.

Their best classes, Whitfield students say, forego textbooks in favor of readings and hands-on experiments. "For half the year we haven't used the book in chemistry," Anna says. "In history, Mr. Handmaker had us read the Communist Manifesto, then something on Nicaragua by Salman Rushdie, then something by the African writer Chinua Achebe. We combine a lot of literature, art, and history. You understand a lot more, you can interpret it better, and it's more memorable—especially if you're better at one thing, like art, than you are at another."

A striking exception to the enthusiasm students express for their Essential classes is their conviction that altering traditional math instruction is not an easy thing to pull off. Many math teachers, they say, can only teach one skill level at once, and the kids who are quicker to grasp things are impatient when they are held back. At Whitfield, math is taught in the conventionally sequenced way, and at Parkway South, several students told me that their "Coalition math" classes had

bombed, leaving them scrambling this year to catch up in more traditional classes. Still, at Walbrook students did praise Essential School math classes. "There's not necessarily one right answer, even in math," says Nathan Scovens. "It's challenging, because there's always a second way we can try out. In a regular math class, if you have a formula, that's it—you don't need or desire any more."

The work is more demanding in student-centered classes, Whitfield students agree, but they often hardly realize it—a comment I heard from students at other schools as well. "It doesn't seem so nose-to-the-grindstone, punch-out-those-answers," says junior John Brunjes, who was initially mistrustful, he says, of the different teaching style he encountered at Whitfield. "At first I thought, What are they doing? It seems to waste so much time. But now, in conversation around the dinner table at home, I see that my questions and answers are becoming more original. I can talk to my younger sister about what Prohibition is, say, and I can talk to my dad about the ideas involved, and how it relates to things now."

"If you're studying revolution, and you see the art or literature of that revolution, it's much more memorable." (Anna Giuliani, Whitfield)

For John, who is dyslexic, Essential School teaching "gives people a broader range to do well in. If you're good at memorization, maybe you do well in the other kind of class. But if you can take things and sort them out in your mind and *do* something with them, come up with a new idea, you do better in classes like this. The teacher directs you, but you learn mostly from the other students. You bang your heads together and you get sparks, but if there's something

else in there, you get fire."

Though kids at every school seemed to take new energy and enthusiasm from Essential School classes, they were all quick to point out that "it's not for everyone." Honors students who have done well in lecture-style courses may resent it, says Parkway senior Angie Gunn. "They want to just take it in, keep moving, spit it back, get their grades, not be held back by Joe here who doesn't get it." Still, these dissatisfied students are hard to locate. One of the few who was willing to say the new ways were not for *him* was Court Levy, a junior at Whitfield who says he gets lower grades here for the same amount of work that would get him A's at another school.

"My friend who goes to public school comes over to use my computer, and he's all stressed out because he has to write a paper," Court says in irritation. "It's the first paper he's had to write all year in any of his classes! Here I have to write papers every weekend, anywhere from a page or two up to five pages. My grades would definitely be better even if I put in less work if I went to his school—which is supposed to be a good school."

This isn't fair to him in a couple of ways, Court argues. "You go to high school, you want to have fun," he admits. But also, he says, he's worried: Will college admissions officers recognize that his grades stand for a whole different set of expectations? Indeed, both getting into college and what it will be like once they are there is a subject that juniors and seniors at every school speculate about incessantly. Nobody's going to hold your hand once you're in college, they say—will they be spoiled by all this individual attention?

Prodded, they admit that the skills they are acquiring just might be useful in college regardless. "I can sit down and write an essay now," says Parkway South's Billie Lawrence with satisfaction. Her

"There's not really such a thing as a nerd in the Coalition. If you're doing your best and you do well, everybody thinks it's cool." (Latanya Robinson, Walbrook)

classmate Mike Keehnast agrees. "Coalition teachers expect you to take initiative—you can't just go to class, you have to write, and get up and make presentations, and prepare for life."

In what they call "real life"—not, clearly, where they feel they are now—they are more confident that these skills will serve them well. "You need to have more than book smarts," says Parkway's Monique Huntley. "You need to use your head. Coalition gives you that." In the real world, Amy Jaeger adds, "you're going to meet people smarter than you and people under you, and if you don't know how to work with different kinds, that will hurt you." And some students acknowledge, like Whitfield's John Brunjes, that in life outside school they already approach discussions differently. "Say I'm up against a completely unfamiliar situation outside school, like getting in an argument," tenth-grader Debbie Becker told me. "I can break things down into questions, and I know the steps to get to the answers."

Write to us . . .

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Just how much of all this praise should be attributed to the "Hawthorne effect," which can appear to make almost any new project successful just because people are excited and energized by something intriguingly new? Of course, these kids can't tell, and neither can we, aside from noting the incontrovertible evidence that paying more personal attention to students goes a long way toward educating them better. Until Essential schools have been around for a while, it will be hard to disentangle the other rewards of the approach itself from those due to the special attention and enthusiasm it generates.

"We didn't know what it was going to be like—but we ended up shaping it ourselves. We ended up making it." (Twelfth-grader, Parkway South)

Still, spending time with these students left me with an eerie shift of perspective, after having written about this movement for two years from a more theoretical, more political, more analytical point of view. I saw a reform movement from the bottom up, stripped of the structure of its overarching theories, its jargon, its adult agendas. In students' words, time and again, I heard poignant echoes of the nine common principles, framed in the most personal of terms. The altering of what goes on in their classrooms may register only as a "bad teacher, good teacher" contrast—and only a fool would insist that good teachers all fit some definitive Coalition pattern. Inarguably, though, these kids do notice what goes on in their classes. They tell "before" stories in hair-raising detail—kids falling asleep with Walkmans on in the back of the class, *teachers* falling asleep at the front. They know the difference between a teacher sick of kids and one who respects them,

ESSENTIAL MOMENTS

Overheard at a staff retreat at Central Park East Secondary School:

New teacher to principal Deborah Meier: "When is the last day of school?"

Meier, with a curious, bemused look: "You really don't know?"

New teacher: "No."

Meier, shaking her head slowly, smiling: "That's good. That's really, really good."

between a class where they sit doodling and what they call a "fun class"—"where you have time to share your opinion, where you're listened to," as Parkway's Tammy Bateman says. "I mean, things are going through *your* mind, too." Even if the common principles of Essential Schools do nothing but acknowledge that, I left these schools thinking, these kids are better served. □



HORACE

Coalition of Essential Schools
Box 1938
Brown University
Providence, RI 02912

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