

HORACE'S SCHOOL: REDESIGNING THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL

THEODORE R. SIZER
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 1992
\$15.00, 256 pages

Reviewed by Kathleen McCann

Although written 12 years ago, Sizer's work *Horace's School* remains timely, calling educators to think critically about the status quo in the majority of American high schools. In *Horace's Compromise*, the first book in the trilogy, Sizer introduces Horace Smith, a 59-year-old, veteran teacher at Franklin High School, an inner suburban school of 1,350 students. Horace is Sizer's ideal teacher. Throughout that text, Horace explains the compromises that he has been forced to make. Critical of the status quo and unsatisfied with his students and his school, he feels that the students lack intellectual curiosity, and often go through school collecting extra-curriculars for college applications, but lacking critical thinking skills and the ability to apply what they have learned in the real world. Horace laments that the depth of student relationships is compromised because teachers have too much to do and their classes are too large. He criticizes the current curriculum because it fails to make connections between different subjects, and it has become merely what teachers must cover and the material to which students will be exposed. Horace feels his school is too big to be effective, and teachers are forced to teach large numbers of students using a disjointed curriculum. Horace criticizes the fact that although students of the same age are different, they are grouped together in school by age, regardless of ability, and tracked to believe that they can handle certain work and not handle other work. Each year teachers and students remain stuck in routines established long ago. Teachers push to cover the assigned material, rarely examining this method. Horace explains that he and his fellow teachers compromise each day. He is frustrated that decision-making is left to those in higher positions and the opinions and ideas of teachers are ignored. "The major elements of schooling are controlled outside the teachers' world" (p. 8).

In *Horace's School*, the second of the three books, Sizer presents the ideas

behind the Coalition of Essential Schools, which the author founded in 1984. In this text, Horace Smith is chosen to head a committee to redesign Franklin High School. Sizer uses the fictional discussions and planning work of the committee to thoroughly present the philosophy of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Horace's committee was formed to examine the school and develop recommendations for change. With the growth of the Essential Schools' movement, the book is no longer as radical as it would have been when it was released 12 years ago; however, Sizer's systematic presentation of the elements of an Essential School remains compelling. At the beginning of each chapter, Horace's committee meets and discusses the challenges facing Franklin High School. These discussions serve as Sizer's method of introducing each aspect of the Essential School. Following each fictional meeting, Sizer explains theories about education and what type of reforms are most needed. As explained in the introduction, Sizer "hopes to define the coalition's ideas of what better schools should be" (p. xi). To close each chapter, Sizer revisits the committee, whose thoughtful and varied personas challenge and ponder his ideas.

Sizer uses several essential questions to frame his thesis about what comprises an Essential School. Horace's committee examines these questions in its work. Sizer asks: What characteristics should admirable high school graduates display? How should schools function so that all adolescents can have a fair chance to display these accomplishments? How can schools help the maximum number of youth achieve these goals? The author questions what sort of political, administrative, and community context is required for effective schools and considers how the needs of individuals who are part of the system can be met.

As the committee attempts to redesign Franklin High School, it grapples with questions of testing, community expectations, the development of intellectual habits, faculty dynamics, and the need for application of learning. Sizer argues that educators and those committed to school reform cannot ignore the children with whom and for whom they are working. "We are dealing with the habits and convictions and understandings of young citizens who are compelled by the state to attend school. No sector of American public life is more fragile, more at risk, and more important" (p. 114). The author's commitment to young people and to the education of the whole person is obvious.

Horace's School presents several real questions facing school reform efforts. Sizer challenges the current dependency on standardized tests as measures of success and argues that teachers are often teaching to the tests. At the same time, Sizer acknowledges that these methods are culturally engrained. The author argues that radical changes are necessary to be more effective; however, Sizer recognizes that this is often threatening to parents and to students applying to colleges and universities. Buying into Sizer's theory requires a strong belief that this new method of measuring achievement

and learning would be effective and accepted by the larger academic community. It is here that the use of the fictional committee is most effective. Horace and his colleagues realistically debate the issues and the proposed reforms. Their varied viewpoints allow Sizer to subtly win over even the most skeptical critics on the fictional committee and in the audience of readers.

Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools expresses a set of common principles, which each school can use to develop its own program. These principles emphasize that schools should focus on helping adolescents learn to use their minds well and helping students to master a number of essential skills and be competent in certain areas of knowledge. The theory of "less is more" should dominate curricular decision-making, and school practice should be tailored to meet the needs of individual students. Teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum extent feasible, and teachers should not be responsible for too many students. Furthermore, teachers should have influence in choosing teaching materials and specific pedagogies. The governing metaphor of the school should be "student as worker" with the teachers as coaches instead of being merely deliverers of information. The Coalition also explains that students not ready for higher studies should be given remedial work until they are sufficiently prepared. It explains that to receive a diploma, students will have to complete an exhibition showing his or her grasp of central skills and knowledge. The tone of an Essential School should be one of high expectations, trust, and decency. Parents should be treated as essential collaborators. The principal and teachers should perceive themselves first as generalists and then as specialists in a field of study. Staff should expect multiple obligations and exhibit a sense of commitment to the entire school. Budgets and administrative planning should place a priority on time for collective planning by teachers and competitive salaries for staff. Budgets should remain not more than 10% over the budgets at traditional schools. The Coalition presents these principles as guidelines for its member schools to adapt as they see fit.

Many of Sizer's ideas can be found in the mission and philosophy of Catholic schools, but *Horace's School* and the guiding principles still offer a unique approach for a critical self-analysis that could strengthen many Catholic schools. Sizer calls schools to consider their curriculum and the driving forces behind it. The text advocates looking at the whole child and structuring education to meet the needs of individual students. Because Catholic schools are largely autonomous and have always been supportive of the idea of educating the whole child, decisions to embrace this paradigm shift might not be as difficult in Catholic schools as they would be in other settings.

The Coalition of Essential Schools proposes adopting many characteristics that Catholic schools already embody. Sizer explains, "Staff should expect multiple obligations (teacher-counselor-manager) and a sense of commitment to the entire school" (p. 108). Catholic school teachers have always

been called upon to wear many hats, to give generously, and to commit themselves to the wider mission of the whole Church. In addition, Sizer states,

The tone of the school should explicitly and self-consciously stress the values of unanxious expectation (“I won’t threaten you, but I expect much of you”), of trust (unless it is abused), and of decency (the values of fairness, generosity, and tolerance). Incentives appropriate to the school’s students and teachers should be emphasized, and parents should be treated as essential collaborators. (p. 208)

These values are some of the fundamental characteristics that have helped to make Catholic schools effective for hundreds of years. High expectations, trust, and ongoing support are hallmarks of effective Catholic schools.

Sizer presents ideas for improvements, which could benefit many Catholic schools. The author emphasizes individualized education for students, making curricular decisions based on the theory of “less is more,” and finding ways to integrate curriculum. These things would certainly be helpful in Catholic schools. Sizer extols the benefits of smaller class sizes because of the potential for relationships with individual students and expresses the importance of competitive salaries for staff. More competitive salaries would certainly benefit faculty and staff in Catholic schools and could help Catholic schools increase retention rates. The Coalition’s emphasis on exhibitions where students can demonstrate applications of their knowledge is good, and Catholic schools could certainly adapt this idea.

It is not surprising that Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools has grown to over 600 schools throughout the United States. This is a dramatic increase from the 200 schools that were involved in the Coalition in 1991 when the book was written. The author’s criticisms of the status quo are thought provoking and challenging. Sizer’s ideas for restructuring American high schools are wide-reaching and somewhat radical. They require a thoughtful and deliberate approach, as outlined by the fictional committee’s work in *Horace’s School*.

Catholic schools are becoming more interested in the Essential Schools model. Gilmour Academy in Gates Mills, Ohio is a member of the Coalition, and many new schools, such as the Nativity schools and the Cristo Rey Network schools run by the Jesuits, certainly embody many of the characteristics Sizer extols. The schools’ emphasis on the education of the whole person, teaching across the curriculum, and viewing parents as essential collaborators are crucial elements in successful Catholic education today, especially in our inner cities. Horace would appreciate the attention given to these issues at many Catholic schools yet would still be fighting for more time for collaboration among faculty and staff, better salaries, and greater depth

within curriculum.

The book challenges the reader to consider adopting some of the Essential Schools' principles; however, some of the ideas require such a paradigm shift, they would be difficult to implement without embracing the whole model. This is perhaps the work's only fault. For someone who is in a position of lesser influence, the prospect of bringing these ideas beyond his or her own classroom is difficult. Even at the classroom level, it is hard to control one's situation when teachers are forced to compromise in so many areas because of the factors Sizer discusses early in the book. While this is somewhat disheartening for individuals, the work provides an interesting look at the reforms possible with strong and forward-thinking leadership within a school. The recently published third book in the trilogy, *Horace's Hope: What Works for the American High School* will ideally offer answers for how to apply these ideas more concretely within the classroom and on a smaller scale within an individual school. The Coalition of Essential Schools affirms Catholic education in many ways, yet it also has much to offer Catholic schools, even when it is impossible to make the sweeping reforms outlined in *Horace's School*.

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LEADING WITH SOUL: AN UNCOMMON JOURNEY OF SPIRIT

LEE G. BOLMAN & TERRENCE E. DEAL
JOSSEY-BASS, 2001
\$24.95, 224 pages

Reviewed by Eileen Quinlan

There have been many secular studies on the qualities of leadership, but few address the spiritual aspects like *Leading With Soul*. Bolman and Deal describe one man's spiritual journey to find the essence of his own leadership