

On Changing Secondary Schools: A Conversation with Ted Sizer

Former Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and Headmaster of Phillips Academy at Andover, Massachusetts, Ted Sizer is the author of *Horace's Compromise*, the report of a five-year study of adolescent education. Now Chair of the Coalition of Essential Schools, Sizer insists that high schools can do better by doing less, by concentrating on what is essential to students' intellectual growth.

You're doing your best to change American high schools. Why?

Because they're not serving either kids or teachers as well as they might. The evidence from solid research over the last 10 years—research conducted from different points of view—demonstrates a pattern of problems which we must address.

How would you summarize these problems?

We try to do too much. And the way we organize youngsters' and teachers' time doesn't make sense in light of how kids learn and how we might teach them. The result is that a majority of kids don't perform as well as they ought to, and a significantly large number of teachers are frustrated because they feel a sense of responsibility to those youngsters.

You've often expressed concern about "docile" students. What do you mean by that, and what causes it?

I mean youngsters who are not in the habit of taking a problem and solving it on their own. This is not surprising, as there are few incentives in high schools for kids actually to engage their minds deeply.

You saw this yourself in your recent study of high schools?

Right.

What did you find that was so convincing?

The similarity of the problems in a wide range of schools: small ones, big ones, public ones, private ones. When you see a disturbing pattern repeated over and over again, its importance

increases. I also learned of the deep frustration of many of the very best people I listened to. And there was a clear readiness among them to move—to ask the big questions and to make fundamental changes.

Let's talk about the project you're involved in, an effort to work in partnership with some schools to make these changes.

The project is a group of about 50 schools, a varied group in 19 states and 1 Canadian province. All have agreed to a simple set of ideas about schooling; and all of us believe that every community, every school, is necessarily different from any other. That is, we don't have a model to plug in; we have a set of ideas. Each school is shaping those ideas into a program in a way respectful of its local situation.

Does that mean you think that in the long run schools ought to be different from one another?

Absolutely.

But surely there would be some things one would expect to be similar.

General principles, yes, but the way they play out should be different. What's right in Ansley, Nebraska, may not be right for Portland, Maine, and vice versa.

Is it possible to generalize about the sorts of things schools in the project are trying to do?

Yes, there are patterns. They arise from the ideas that we share. Those ideas are old chestnuts; read them and you'll say, "Good grief. What's so new

about that?" And nothing is—that's one of their joys. On the other hand, taking them seriously forces some issues that previously were simply papered over.

A key view among us in the Coalition of Essential Schools is that the most important purpose of schooling—without exception, for all students—is intellectual development. Everybody says, "Sure. How do you express that in programs?" What you see in these Coalition schools are programs focused much more on helping youngsters to use their minds well. It's particularly impressive to see that priority pushed with kids who are turned off, who have done badly in school, who are likely to drop out.

How do the schools do that?

One way is to get the ratios way down: the number of kids for which each teacher feels a sense of responsibility. One of the common ideas of the Coalition is that no high school teacher will ever be responsible for more than 80 students (some of my friends in schools that enroll quite demoralized kids say even 80 is too many). But bringing those ratios down within roughly the existing per-pupil expenditure means drastically simplifying a school's program.

Does that mean schools are actually dropping parts of their curriculums at this point?

Absolutely. For example, a school serving a high proportion of demoral-



Photograph by John Foran/photographer Brown University

ized kids may have a very simple program taught entirely by teams: a humanities team and a science team. It has a three-period day, the first period being a tutorial or an advisory period in which every adult in the building (except one person who answers the phones to say that everybody's busy) meets with a group of 13 or 14 kids—and that is a ratio that's possible within an existing budget. In the tutorial the teachers gather the kids, go over homework, arrange for students to have breakfast if they haven't had any, try to soften the clatter that a lot of these kids bring in at the beginning of a school day. Then there's a two-and-a-half-hour block of time for English, art, and history. After lunch there's a math-science block. You find in some of the schools all of the kids working within—let's say—mathematics and science, or a common general theme such as "vision and light" or in the humanities, "revolution." You're immediately struck by the apparent lack of course electives. But the teachers in these schools will say that, because the program is very simple, the faculty can concentrate on personalizing their teaching. They can create sensible personal "electives," electives that emerge from what each youngster is like and what he or she really needs.

So the big computerized master schedule is much less a factor?

Some of these schools could be scheduled over a coffee break. Now, having said that, let me point out that the real issues of timing and grouping simply have been moved to another level. You have your 3 teachers and 90 kids in a Humanities group—how do you group those 90 kids? And how do you regroup them every fortnight? Now that's a complicated scheduling problem. These schools skip the "scheduling problem" by pushing it way down so that the decisions are made by the adults who know the particular kids best.

It would seem that parents and community members would be very influential in determining whether these programs succeed.

Oh, yes. In communities where the schools compete—that is, private

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schools or competitive schools in the public sector—it's a marketing problem for the principal and faculty: they get the kids whose parents want them to come. In other situations—a one-high school town, let's say, that everybody attends—it's a combination of two things. One is persuading the parents that simplification and focus, placing a greater demand on the youngsters, serves traditional interests even better than the status quo. Second is that their youngsters are going to have more options in the future with this kind of approach.

Some of the big high schools which aren't schools of choice have elected to create, at least initially, the Essential School program as a school-within-a-school option for parents and kids to choose. All the schools that have taken this approach have started with either 7th or 9th grade and will move gradually to full-scale operation. In several of the schools, when the Essential School-within-a school gets to its full size, it will have more than half the student body.

If one believes in choice and there's only the one local school, maybe alternatives should be available within that one school.

Yes, unless the community is convinced that the status quo is not working, and that is the case in one of the Coalition's rural schools. Clearly the kids were not going anywhere, and the

community as a whole—represented by the school board and by a very vigorous parents group—felt that the risk of trying something new was far less than the risk of standing still.

Is it difficult for a faculty of a large comprehensive school where they've tried to do a little of everything to begin to take seriously the idea that "less is more"?

It certainly is. The very expanse of curriculum provided turf, and people's jobs depend on turf. When you say you're going to redefine turf, that threatens people's jobs. Some teachers go to the wall and say, "I will teach only chemistry; and if I can't do that, I won't do anything." Others will rise to the challenge and say, "Okay, I'll just dust off my college work in physics."

But, inevitably, in a school determined to make these kinds of changes, some teachers will probably lose their jobs. And that is actually happening?

Yes.

Let's talk a little more about these schools' strategy for change. High schools are generally regarded as bastions of tradition. I think I remember from the RAND studies of the 1970s that not a single high school project was regarded as successful. What makes you such an optimist about the possibility of reforming high schools?

As a historian I would characterize high schools less as bastions of conservatism than as mirrors of society. American society does not really value adolescents very much. I still shake from reading the fifth chapter in David Cohen's *The Shopping Mall High School*—a devastating critique not so much of schools but of the American people, who seem willing to live with the hypocrisy of an elaborate graduation ceremony with diplomas that some of the recipients can't even read.

So why my optimism? I sense in the current mood of the country a sustained interest in substantial change. Enough people in politics and education apparently realize that the situation is so serious, both in the schools and in the fact that the United States is

in a competitive race for its very life, that the old complacency won't work anymore.

So as a historian who sees a close relationship between schools and society, you can account for the fact of considerable stability in the high school for much of this century, but you also know from history that when circumstances reach a certain point, things happen. And this may be the time.

Right. An analogy isn't perfect, but it's worth mentioning: the great push toward a common Americanizing curriculum that followed turn-of-the-century immigration. People in the Northeast and Midwest saw a crisis because of so many "foreigners," and big city school systems grew very rapidly in response to the political perception of a real emergency. We may be in a similar situation now.

Your analogy makes me rethink my statement about stability because the high school really did adapt dramatically.

The biggest change was its growth, which can be explained in two ways. One was recognition by the public that adolescents should have access to schools on a full-time basis. That is, the country didn't want—indeed, didn't need—adolescent labor. The second factor was that the country was wealthy enough to pay for it. The explosive growth of high schools in the first two decades of this century and again right after the Second World War, not surprisingly, corresponded with excess revenue in the tax coffers that followed economic booms.

That raises another basic issue. We have had a major split between the Mortimer Adlers, who have insisted through the years that all students should have an intellectual education, and most practicing educators, who are convinced by their own experience that that is simply unrealistic. I've often heard educators say—I've said it myself—"Let them try. We work with these kids, and we know there are certain kinds of adapta-

tions that must be made." Are the Essential Schools rethinking that whole issue?

The Essential Schools take a Jeffersonian view that, aside from a small percentage of students with profound special needs, every youngster has a mind; and democracy depends on the wise use of that mind. If people be-

lieve that some members of society cannot learn to use their minds well, then they'd better move to Sparta. Our whole system of government depends on the wisdom of the individual citizen. Maybe such a sentiment is naive, but it happens to be democracy.

Well, it's a wonderful statement; but if I had been teaching in a

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Alternative Community School Dave Lehman, Principal 111 Chestnut St Ithaca, NY 14850	Doss High School Gordon Miller, Principal 7601 St. Andrews Church Rd Louisville, KY 40214	Nova Middle School Suzanne Alford, Principal 3602 SW College Ave Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314
Andover High School Mr. Richardson, Acting Principal Andover, MA 01810	Pleasure Ridge Park High School Charles Miller, Principal 5901 Greenwood Rd Pleasure Ridge Park, KY 40258	The Park School of Buffalo Thomas Fulton, Headmaster 4625 Harlem Rd Snyder, NY 14226
Bishop Carroll High School Bernard Banik, Principal 4624 Richard Rd., SW Calgary, Alberta T2E 0L1 Canada	Seneca High School John Whiting, Principal 3510 Goldsmith La Louisville, KY 40220	Parley South High School Craig Larson, Principal 801 Hanna Rd Manchester, MO 63021
Brighton High School Thomas Jones, Principal 1150 Winton Rd. South Rochester, NY 14618	Mayne S. Waggener High School Donna Ludwig, Principal 330 S. Hubbards La St. Matthews, KY 40207	Portland High School Barbara Anderson, Principal 294 Cumberland Ave Portland, ME 04101
Brimmer and May School Anne Restier, Headmistress 69 Middlesex Rd. Chester Hill, MA 02116	Park Heights Street Academy Deneau Robinson, Headmaster 3901 Park Heights Ave Baltimore, MD 21215	The Putney School Barbara Barnes, Director Elm Lea Farm Putney, VT 05446
Bronxville High School Judith Coddling, Principal Pondfield Rd Bronxville, NY 10708	Paschal High School Radford Gregg, Principal 3001 Forest Park Blvd. Fort Worth, TX 76110	St. Andrew's-Sewanee Rev. William S. Wade, Headmaster St. Andrews, TN 37372
Bryn Mawr School Barbara Chase, Headmistress 109 W. Melrose Baltimore, MD 21210	The Judson Montessori School Gay Jones Judson, Director 705 Trafalgar San Antonio, TX 78216	St. Xavier Academy Joyce Blum, School Liaison 225 MacArthur Blvd Gowanus, NY 02816
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high school for the last 15 to 20 years, and I had been used to tracking students and providing quite a different curriculum for the low track, it would be hard to convince me that somehow I'd been wrong all along.

But "you" have been wrong. Jeannie Oakes' book, *Keeping Track*, makes that very clear.

And schools in the Coalition intend to change that?

Absolutely. We're giving it a noble try. We're assuming that everybody's going to make the grade. Essential Schools group students according to what they need to learn, and they regroup frequently; they don't hammer any youngster permanently into the structure of the school, saying, "This kid is in the General track, and that one is in the Honors track, forevermore." Behind all of this is the assumption not only that every youngster can use his or her mind well, but that if we give up on that goal, we give up on democracy.

A series of books by Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Lynne Cheney, Diane Ravitch, and Chester Finn have charged that schools are neglecting the teaching of cultural knowledge, especially history and literature, and that they've been emphasizing process and skills too much instead. Is that a concern of schools in the Coalition?

Yes it is, though I think most of us agree with part of the critique but not all of it. The idea that schools put too much emphasis on process and not enough on content doesn't square with my experience or that of others who spend a lot of time in schools. What strikes me about all too many high school classrooms is the churning out of disembodied data which the kids are supposed to spit back. It's facts, facts, facts at their absolute grotesque worst. If Hirsch, Cheney, et al. think we're teaching skills, well—sorry, friends; it's worse than you think.

They may have reached that conclusion by looking at textbooks.

"American society does not really value adolescents very much."

That's like making a judgment about the telephone system by looking at the phone book. To be blunt about it, analysis of schools on such a limited basis is poor scholarship.

You've been in a lot of high school classrooms, and you haven't seen too much "process"?

Right. And John Goodlad's people spent years visiting schools and found much the same pattern. But I don't mean to be contentious about cultural literacy. I think Hirsch and the others are making a very important point. Take an example from social studies. For a young American there is no part of the school curriculum that is more important than that addressing the United States Constitution; and for a 16-year-old to really understand the Constitution, time is needed. Or take another pivotal document, the Declaration of Independence. Mortimer Adler argues that you can spend three hours on just part of the first sentence. The Bill of Rights needs very careful work—lots of examples, case studies, Socratic dialogue, role-playing, and so on. Otherwise the kids will not get to the bottom of those fundamental ideas that drive this country, not understand them enough to use them. I think that's what Lynne Cheney and Diane Ravitch are talking about.

Now, I use that example of the

Constitution because it's so easy to defend. Not many people would say, "Oh no, it's more important that students know about X." Choices get more difficult when you get out on the margin and begin to argue, for example, whether the current waves of immigration from Asia are as "important" in "history" as the waves of immigration from southwestern and eastern Europe since the 1890s. Our view is to join these issues: "Let's make some very hard decisions about what is most essential and teach this thoroughly."

So you disagree with some of what Hirsch says, but you think he is calling attention to an important issue?

Oh, yes. And to be fair about it, I am less criticizing what Hirsch says than what some enthusiasts think he says. Professor Hirsch is under no illusion about how complicated these things are.

A related question. In his book Hirsch also takes a couple of swipes at schools' efforts to teach critical thinking, because he says that distracts them from teaching knowledge.

In good schools that issue is a straw man. The way to get serious critical thinking is to get kids' minds focused on substantial matters. Give them the text of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, give some background for that decision, and then go into the kind of Socratic dialogue that Mortimer Adler so admires. I don't know how you teach truly critical thinking without consequential subject matter—just as I don't know how you teach consequential subject matter without resourceful thinking.

Would it be accurate to say that these issues seldom arise in typical faculty meetings, but that in the Essential Schools they are being argued?

That's right. That word *essential* in the name of our project has a double meaning. On one hand it is essential that we restructure overloaded and ineffective schools. And our project also involves figuring out what is es-

sential in the way of education. The toughest part is "the politics of subtraction." That is, if you're going to teach the United States Constitution adequately, you're not going to be able to give much attention to the first administration of Grover Cleveland. You have to decide what is fundamental. Facing such choices is consistent with the current mood.

Where, in your opinion, does vocational education fit in the secondary curriculum?

In one respect I don't think it fits at all. In the current economy, jobs change so fast that any type of job-specific training is a very short-range proposition. So to say that schools should prepare students for specific entry-level jobs may be a nice objective but, if you can't do everything in high school, a low priority.

Put another way, in a rapidly changing job market the most important vocational training is general education, which is exactly what the Committee on Economic Development and other business groups have been saying over and over for five or six years. So, in many of our schools that serve kids who mostly don't aspire to higher education, wise principals are now saying to students, "Look. This program we're putting together may not seem to speak to your immediate job prospects; but in fact it is the most important vocational education you can get, because it's teaching you how to teach yourself in a constantly changing situation."

I must also say that some of the vocational education courses I've seen are superbly taught, because they force the kids to do the work. In shop after shop, I've seen teachers who are in the habit of pushing the problem out to the kids, engaging them. Happily, some of those teachers are prepared to use their talents teaching general education. One whom I admired most—a teacher of electricity—I wrote about in my book. He was just magnificent, and under no illusion that he was teaching for entry-level jobs: he was teaching basic educational skills. It's that kind of imaginative

Bronxville High: An "Essential" School in Process

Sherry P. King

When the 9th graders in our interdisciplinary elective no longer saw their teachers as teachers of discrete subjects, we knew we were on the way to success. On a given assignment they might seek help from the English teacher as readily as from the social studies teacher—or from the art teacher, for that matter.

Key principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, of which we are a partner school, are driving forces in our evolving program: personalization, the student-as-worker, exhibition, and the concept of "less is more." Three teachers—Joanne Duffy in social studies, Mary Schenck in English, and Linda Passman in art—are assigned to one course; art is as much a part of the content as English and social studies. We attempt to integrate the disciplines, attending to the basic skills and knowledge each requires as well as to connections among the three.

We piloted the interdisciplinary program in 1986-87 with one heterogeneous class that we scheduled for double periods several times during our eight-day cycle. The content was the same as the regular curriculum—The Ancient World through 1715—but the third teacher and the possibility for different blocks of time allowed us to alter our focus. Perhaps the best way to capture the essence of our program is to describe one of the units.

We began with study of the ancient world. Students were reading *The Odyssey*, a 9th grade required text, and studying Greek culture, with a focus on the norms of society, including notions of hospitality and the value of arts and entertainment. At the same time, students were learning about folios, scrolls, and illustrated manuscripts. Moving deeper into the unit, the teachers struggled to find a creative way for students to exhibit their understanding of the period.

The teachers decided to have students create an additional chapter of *The Odyssey*—not a unique assignment, but other dimensions of the project enhanced it. They had a storyteller come to class as Odysseus and tell his adventures. While the students were working on their own stories, the storyteller, knowledgeable about both the assignment and *The Odyssey*, responded to their drafts by challenging students to try their characters in new situations. He offered provocative responses from his point of view as Odysseus. The final assignment, or exhibition, was to prepare a folio, a scroll, or an illustrated manuscript with their stories. We invited the visiting bard back to join us for a classic banquet, with oral presentations of the stories as its entertainment.

Our approach has produced problems along with successes. Our most prominent hurdle is time—time to plan, time to cover the content, time to be with students. We also struggle with the knowledge that not all students are in this program. Thus we are torn between our desire to encourage divergent thinking, our need for the time required to help students make connections, and our commitment to cover *The Ancient World* through 1715. We struggle, too, with grading policies: how can we promote collaborative learning and still evaluate individuals fairly; how can we ask students to take risks and then have to evaluate them?

Despite these possibly unanswerable problems, we would find it hard to teach any other way. We have seen students learn to read, think, and generalize in ways that go far beyond their peers of similar abilities. We have seen students willing, even eager, to investigate subjects independently and in depth. Our students have maintained high individual standards but have developed a sense of caring for each other as they help one another learn.

We have grown along with our students, becoming facilitators of learning more than disseminators of information. Our daily conversation and collaboration have broken the isolation of teaching. We are piloting a similar class in 10th grade, and expanding our 9th grade program. In our enthusiasm to increase connections among disciplines, we must remember not simply to add content, but to heed our own belief that "less is more."

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teaching, which I've seen often in voc-tech programs, that some science and social studies departments could well copy.

There's something I'm curious about. If these public schools are successful in their efforts, they will look more like what private schools have looked like all along. Your professional experiences have been mostly in non-public schools. Are you simply trying to shape public schools to look more like private schools?

No, no. I've been very aware, particularly during the years when I was able to wander around and visit, that there's a stereotype of public school and a stereotype of private school. Everything I admired in the large private school in which I worked in the '70s I've seen working in public schools.

Let me put it another way. There are, for instance, some big Catholic high schools which, if you didn't notice the crucifixes on the wall, you couldn't identify as public or religious schools. And I can show you some public schools which—due to, for example, the social class segregation of the community—have an ambience which is stereotypically attached to a high-tuition private country day school. Public and private schools aren't all that different. Indeed, one of the embarrassments of American education is how similar all our schools—private and public—are, given our rhetoric about local control and the need for professional freedom.

Can you say more about exactly how the schools are undertaking the changes you are talking about? I can hear a high school principal saying, "Sounds good, but I don't see how they do it. This is a complex institution, and people are very busy just getting by. How do I get teachers to read about these ideas; how do I get them to even consider the possibility?"

There are as many approaches as there are schools in the Coalition, but

let me describe a kind of prototype. In every school where something is under way, there is a core of people, usually including the principal, who feel that (a) the school is a good school, and (b) it can be a hell of a lot better. Those folks start talking; and, if the talk gets beyond immediate things such as merely "Let's add a period to the school day," an ambitious plan evolves.

It's at that point that the Coalition tends to get involved. Where principals and teachers know about the Coalition, and find that their own thinking is running along similar lines, they get in touch. At that point there's more talk, parents are brought into it, the superintendent and key school board members add their backing, and a plan is worked out. In some cases the plan has been subject to a faculty wide vote. Where there is a strong union and a quite specific contract, amendments to that contract have even been voted by an entire citywide membership.

So the process starts with a group of people who have pride in their school and a conviction that they can do better. It continues quite slowly, evolving into a plan which then has to get—if it is a plan of any consequence—wide support. Then, in a big high school, it usually starts with a school-within-a-school; or it starts with a series of well-planned and carefully staged changes in the overall school.

So the general pattern is to start small and grow.

Yes. And it takes time.

Do you see indications that these schools are in fact bringing more people in? Are they making headway on changing the whole school rather than remaining a small, relatively separate unit?

Yes. One example, where the whole school is involved, is in a city with five high schools where there's open enrollment: most students go to their neighborhood school, but they can go to another school if they have a particular reason. And at the end of its second year the Essential High School is outdrawing the competing schools.

Students from all over town want to go to that school. It has exactly the same per pupil expenditures, but it is set up in a simplified way; and it's getting a reputation among the youngsters of the community: you're not a cipher there; you're not anonymous. There's not nearly as much listless listening to teachers as in a regular school; there's a lot more "doing," which means that the kids are held accountable, and they like it. Oh, they complain to me when I visit about having to work harder than kids at the other schools, but attendance rates are way up, discipline rates are down, and the dropout rate is infinitesimal.

Now, when you do that for two years, superintendents, the school board, and parents begin to pay attention—and the program accelerates. Oh, it could blow up tomorrow; I'm under no illusion that there's a panacea here. However, even in some troubled communities you find real progress.

Can you identify some things these schools are learning that would be useful to other high school principals and administrators across the country who'd like to improve their schools?

One thing they've learned is that planning requires a major investment of time: the time needed to think through these matters carefully must not be underestimated. Another truism: everything important in a school affects everything else that's important. For example, if you want to rearrange your program to make the kids more active, to let them derive answers rather than simply memorize them, that obviously affects not only the speed with which you move over the subject matter, but also the blocks of time necessary for the kids to engage in it. The teachers and principals will tell you this can't be done piecemeal. That means that planning must be comprehensive indeed. □

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