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Better High Schools

What Would Create Them?

Theodore R. Sizer

The American desire to improve education has set off a flurry of activity to reform schools. In such a climate of restructuring, Sizer explores what better secondary schools might “look like” if indeed they existed. His consideration of the improved high school is based on five particular conditions — all of which support teachers and students in their engagement with the serious stuff of learning and all of which must exist in one form or another for schools to be effective. The conditions are cast as questions. Sizer locates the responsibility for school reform broadly, from the heart of a school — the relationships between teachers and students — to the life and behaviors of the community in which that school is nestled. This article is a collective call to action around ultimately simple and sensible ideas reminiscent of a form of civic participation long overdue.

Many of us want improved secondary schools. What can we do to bring them about? As we well know from our own schooling and that of our children, it isn't the routines of schooling as much as the people within those routines that make the difference between a mindless education and a meaningful one. There isn't, therefore, a neat “perfect school model to plug in” or, to use current jargon, for “teachers to implement.” Much as reformers may long for a pedagogical McDonald's, it isn't possible. Our damnable humaneness and that of our children makes strictly standardized solutions to educational problems inevitably mediocre and procrustean.

Yet it is not only the “people” — teachers and other kids at all their special and often quirky best — who set an exciting and purposeful climate in schools. There are certain conditions under which all those individuals can best engage with the important ideas that comprise the stuff of a serious education. As some of these conditions are essential for effective secondary schools, they deserve the attention of policymakers. The conditions that distinguish “good” schools are most usefully cast as questions, the answers to which will necessarily differ in detail from school community to school community. However, to be “good,” a school must grapple with all of them.

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1. *Is every child well known to those who will teach him?* If we do not know our students well, we cannot teach them. By “well” I mean having sufficient information about them to know how they make mistakes, how they respond to new ideas, to criticism, to abstractions. It is not enough to know that a student has gotten something wrong (for example, if $x + 2 = 6$, then $x = 8$); it is equally important to know why the student messed up. Was she merely inattentive, mindlessly adding the 2 and the 6? Or did she not know how to proceed, accurately clearing the unknown from the given numbers? Telling her that she’s “wrong” is barely a start and unlikely to help her to understand. Knowing how to provoke her into figuring out why she is wrong and, concurrently, into habitually questioning her own work, is a giant further step.

Most serious high school-level work is far more complex than “ $x + 2 = 6$.” One asks students to write clearly and with grace. One asks them to try to make sense of the apparently senseless — the bloodbath in what was formerly Yugoslavia, for example — knowing full well that no one anywhere has a crisp, sure answer to this conundrum, and that even approaching some sort of tentative answer depends on a sophisticated weaving together of cultural and human threads, past and present. Provoking in students the demanding habit of searching for such meaning requires a deep awareness of how to reach each student — who, like all of us, would more often than not like to coast along genially, depending on clichés rather than thinking hard.

To teach well, one has to know one’s students. How many of them can one get to know well enough during a given school term to teach each powerfully? A teacher knows how his kids think, for example, by reading their work regularly and carefully and commenting on it. How much time does such reading take? Perhaps ten minutes per student per week (far less than a clinical psychologist or a physician or a personnel officer might spend comparably)? A typical teacher has five classes averaging twenty-five kids per class. That means 1,250 minutes of reading per week, or twenty-plus hours — of “knowing” 125 kids. Do many teachers have anything approaching this kind of time? Few today do, and these, teaching eighty or fewer youngsters overall, are usually found in private or suburban schools serving the affluent. Teachers of poor kids can expect rosters of 150 to 175 kids.

Serious education anywhere gets the load right: How many “clients” can the professional serve? As we have repeatedly learned, when the numbers are sharply down — the total numbers per teacher, not that less meaningful matter of “class size” — the quality of work almost always goes up. Private schools, the military, businesses, university educators — parents themselves — know this well: it is a truism for them. How many adults seriously believe that they can deal effectively at once with 120 squirmy and distracted adolescents who really don’t want to be learning what we feel we must teach them? The very thought reduces most noneducator adults to nervous laughter.

So when we visit a truly redesigned school we see “loads” of eighty or fewer students per teacher, with compromises made in other parts of the program to allow this to happen without kiting per pupil costs. Such loads are a necessary, but hardly sufficient step toward more powerful teaching and thus learning: teachers have to use this new condition wisely. Further, the system has to honor stability: if teachers are yanked around, that is, moved from school to school on the basis of seniority alone, for example, the opportunity for deep understanding of a group of kids fades. If the

school is large and scheduled centrally, few teachers may see some students more than a single term, hardly enough to know each well, whatever the overall load. An endless schedule shuffle combined with a vast shopping mall-type course list undermines "knowing one's students" profoundly.

Does this condition require radical change? Yes, given current custom: no, when one consults one's common sense. Reform policy has to take the matter seriously. If it doesn't — and it rarely has — there will be no change in results.

2. *Is the academic program coherent from the vantage point of the students?* Does each student have some sense of what is expected of him, why and how it might fit together? Is this understanding cast in such a way that he knows what he must do — and must show us as well — in order to deserve the diploma?

Few conventional schools have any sort of intellectual coherence *on the students' terms*. Strong high schools have strong departments. Each department has a coherent program: there is a sensible sequence of science courses, a persuasive parade of English courses, and so forth. The school and the College Board give tests in the separate sciences, in English, and the other subjects, each in total isolation. The "subjects" are king, each regally contained in his own domain.

However, go to such a strong high school and "shadow" a student for a day or two. Go from French class to biology class to algebra class to English class and try to plumb a common standard among these subjects, a common language across them, an expectation that one can use these subjects in combination to address some sort of real world. Look for the school's courses that require the marshaling of disciplines rather than merely their parallel parade. See whether any teacher models scholarship beyond his own field — the biology teacher who has standards in painting, the history teacher who is adept at poetry. Listen for teachers apart from language teachers conversing in a foreign tongue.

Shadowing is radicalizing, as one sees how high schools — even the most highly regarded ones — are set up by convention to serve in isolation each of the traditional disciplines, while the most difficult intellectual task of all — making sense of the world, looking at life as it presents itself to us, using the traditional disciplines in necessary combination — is left to chance. The general education conventionally promised in the schools' statements of purpose is nothing more than the sum of a variety of parts — however well each is taught — and no adult, with the possible exception here or there of an able school librarian, practices the habits and use of general education in ways that the students can powerfully see.

It is not that the separate disciplines are unimportant: it is just that the individual disciplines are but means to an end, the end being the making of sense in a world that rarely falls into the neat boxes created by scholars as separate subjects. "Sense making" is, of course, the name of the game. Few kids are going to make their careers as specialists in one of the traditional academic disciplines. All will require the resourceful use of all these disciplines, as their world demands. And this resourceful use is itself a demanding intellectual task, one with which schools should ready their students. The fact that few teachers — and even fewer university scholars who "train" those teachers — are prepared to do this is no excuse. "General education" should not be merely something one has to get through before he tangles with a "real" discipline. It should be a consequential intellectual challenge in its own right.

Policy that reinforces the total separation of the disciplines as they are taught in a high school — for example, by means of wholly independent examinations or by

disciplinarily separated curricular requirements or by teacher certification which leaves general education at a trivial margin — reinforces intellectual chaos for the students in school.

3. *Does the full life of the school deliberately and powerfully reflect values that serve the students' education well?* That is, does the school function as it would have the students function? Does it reflect in its own routines those habits which it most wishes the students to absorb?

People, most particularly young people, learn from example. Veteran teachers know well how closely the kids watch them, often for their quirks and even peccadilloes and for the way they address the serious business of using their minds.

Show me an English teacher who herself writes, publishes her work, and nevertheless offers her essays for critique along with those of her students, and I will show you a teacher who is powerfully influential. Show me a school where many of the adults besides the language teachers can be heard speaking a foreign language, and I will show you a school where a language requirement is believed to be serious, and effective student command of the language is a good probability. Show me a science department that always has a bunch of small research projects going, ones that the students can see and engage with, and I will show you a school where the students know what science is.

A school that applies a “code of student conduct” mindlessly — imposes rules without consultation and with only trivial concern for due process — is a school where social studies instruction on the U.S. Constitution has only ironic meaning, or worse. A school which allows a racist slur to go by, which pillories the “different” kid, which tolerates insensitivity in its assembly programs, which assumes that unprovoked violence on, say, the hockey rink is somehow different from that in the hallways, which allows some class of socially special students to get special treatment, is a school that signals thoughtlessness, unfairness, and insensitivity. Adolescents spot all that quickly. Hypocrisy is second only to boredom among qualities that adolescents most frequently cite in describing their schools.

To model the practices that good schools hope their students will adopt as habits takes *time* — time during the school day for teachers to ply their various crafts, time for governance of the school community to take shape and function, time to discuss and discuss again why a thoughtful person — whether “thoughtful” as a scientist or thoughtful as a member of a group of younger and older people — is an exemplary person, why thoughtfulness is a habit worthy of emulation. Many schools claim that they do these things, but few give them enough time and visible administrative reinforcement to make them anything more than rhetorical shells. The kids sense it and learn that the stuff of the curriculum is not important enough for the adults to practice. If this is so, why take it seriously? All those facts are for passing tests, nothing more.

4. *What must a student exhibit to her school's faculty in order to gain its serious respect and, ultimately, its diploma?* Most schools usually discuss “diploma requirements” in terms of hurdles leaped — credits earned, courses passed, years in attendance. They posit no culminating activity of synthesis, no formal — almost ritual — display of mastery. (The traditional standardized examinations for college admission may be thought of this way, yet they do not in fact serve this purpose, and may even undermine it: they are “private,” an affair between the student and a grading machine

in Princeton, New Jersey, or Iowa City, Iowa; in their subject specificity they “test” not at all for academic synthesis.)

Good schools struggle with the specific issues of academic substance and standards, and they devise ways both to make these clear to the students from the beginning of their enrollment in high school and to cast them in the form of what each student must in fact do or, better, “show off.” They thereby give students a sensible and coherent “destination” toward which to travel. Going to school is, in effect, preparing to reach that quite specific destination.

For example, if a sensible destination in the social sciences is an understanding of the restraints and freedoms of constitutional democracy — and ultimately the habitual expression in one’s daily life of those restraints and freedoms — then a school can properly expect its students to know what the Constitution says, to understand the meaning of that knowledge, to be able to apply it to an unfamiliar situation, and to be in the habit of so acting in an immediate instance, such as an incident in the community.

This destination can be defined as, say, the combination of an oral examination on the substance of the Constitution, an essay on its application in an area of life that interests the student, a display of understanding by that student when presented with an unfamiliar Supreme Court case and a thoughtful record of the student’s intellectual journey to understanding these civic matters — a “portfolio.” It can be further defined through apprenticeships — to a patrolman in the local police department, to a lawyer trying a case, or to the operation of a school disciplinary court. Indeed, a powerful way to teach the Constitution, from the start, is through cases, even humble ones readily found in the school itself, such as those involving due process.

Ready examples are equally abundant in the sciences and arts: the design and construction of a large and complex sculpture, one which is as sturdy as it is aesthetically pleasing — an exercise in physics and art; the publication of a book of biographies of regional “heroes” — a book of descriptive and expository writing and of history; the surveying of a city property and the design of a children’s park for that space — an exercise in mathematics, social studies, and politics; the design and construction of a solar-powered vehicle — an experiment that could involve physics, politics, economics, and ecology; the direction and mounting of a performance of *Macbeth*, deliberately staged in a “modern” setting — an experience in the dramatic arts, in artistic extrapolation, in design and construction, and, given its complexity, in organization — in effect, the cruel and very real world of “short-term politics.”

All these examples demand thorough and “usable” knowledge and familiar, basic academic skills. They demand very “public” accountability: many folks will see both the merits and shortcomings of ultimate work. Some require collaboration with others, several involving close work with older people. Simply, these destinations are the thoughtful real world, and school becomes serious practice for that kind of real world. Such destinations appeal to kids just as they might to adults: no one wants merely to jump through a set of hoops in the vague hope that such jumping might ultimately have some meaning and use.

Teaching toward such ends is far more difficult than teaching from a list — “getting through fractions” in order to get to decimals and “explaining the Lincoln-Douglas debates” as a prelude to Fort Sumter. It requires a curriculum of questions, of demanding intellectual challenges that are authentic and that, over time, equip the student forcefully with skills and knowledge. These skills and knowledge are

embedded in meaningful context, and are thus instantly rationalized and immediately used. Plowing through the text becomes puzzling out the problem.

This type of teaching dramatically illumines differences among students — how, why, and at what rate they learn, their willingness to learn, what distracts them, and more. While one can “deliver instruction” to rows of students in classes and seemingly defy these differences, requiring the kids to engage and to display their progress or lack of progress makes the differences among them so transparent that they cannot be wished away. The neat march through the textbook collapses. So does the late nineteenth-century invention of strict age grading and age-normed testing. And so does the contemporary assumption that those kids who “cannot learn” are shuffled off to work sheets and ultimate truancy.

Schools become more like workplaces than lecture halls, places for engaged involvement rather than sermonizing. Student work — what each youngster has displayed — becomes important and is kept and reviewed. “Promotion” becomes less a matter of age and more a matter of performance — and the tension of that required performance is accepted and dealt with. The line between abstraction and experience is blurred, tested, explained. Such schools are noisy, busy places. They look, feel, and sound “different.”

5. *Does the larger community model the habits and values the schools would teach?* That is, if the habit of cheating is taboo at school — as well it might be: Who wants the scientist who cooks his data? — do the adults in the larger community — not only the school as a whole but the community in which the youngster grows up — exhibit honesty? Or are such acts as “misspeaking” and cheating on one’s taxes and edging the golf ball away from the sand trap when no one is looking acceptable?

If fair judgments of the merit of one’s exhibited work are expected in school — the sine qua non of a demanding assessment system — do employers engage in analogous fairness? Or do jobs emerge from connections rather than merit?

If stereotyping and sarcastic putdowns of particular folks are stamped on at school (given that these are representations of profound unfairness and lack of empathy, the makings on a small scale of Holocausts), are they likewise honestly addressed in the workplace and on the street?

If mindless violence is anathema in the school, for all civilized reasons, what is made of the hero status of Rambo?

If civic engagement and integrity are encouraged norms of the school, how can we explain the legacy — in the form of the S&L crisis, the House banking scandal, the reverberations of the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings — that we hand off to the next generation?

If we want to encourage the habit of service — the habit of generosity — do we practice it ourselves, or do we merely pass regulations mandating that the young will “do” seventy-five hours of “community service” (like convicted criminals working off their sentences) to receive a high school diploma?

Young people learn from their elders, from what their elders do as well as what their elders say, not just from the adults hired to work in school or the youngsters’ immediate parents, but from all of us on the street. If we adults care about serious learning — the habits of informed thoughtfulness — then the adolescents will. If we read, they will. If we speak in more than one language, they will. If we vote intelligently, they will. If we reach out to those who need our help, they will. If we respect decent folks who happen to be different from ourselves, they will.

It is all so simple — and so complicated. A good education is an apprenticeship in the thoughtful life, deliberately orchestrated in school buildings but necessarily and inevitably extending far beyond them.

Such is the heart of school reform. If we Americans want potent schools and thoughtful youth, we must start by looking in the mirror: *Do we in our lives sincerely exhibit those qualities which we wish the young to value?* If we do, and so practice, the rest will be remarkably easy. ♣

“It’s clear that parents are interested in public education. Parents have never been able to make the connection with the general populace about how important [public education] is for the survival of our country — not only our democratic principles, but our very own economic survival.”

— Kathy Kelley