

The New American High School

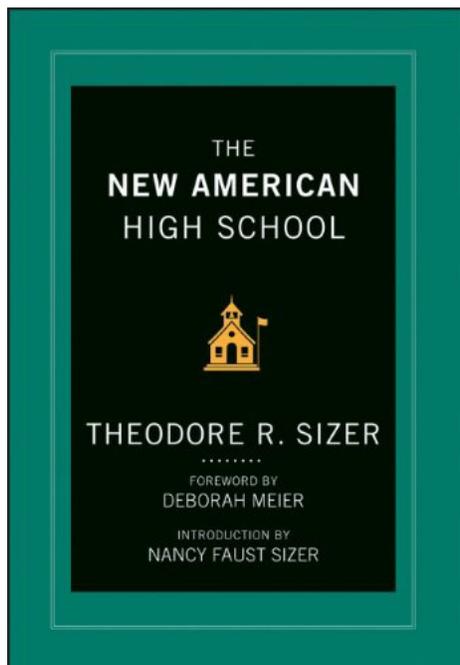
By Theodore R. Sizer

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In 1987, I was the principal of the Alternative Community School, a public middle and high school in Ithaca, New York. We applied for and were granted membership as one of the first fifty schools to join the fledgling Coalition of Essential Schools, begun by Ted Sizer, then Chairman of the Education Department at Brown University. The application process was extensive, requiring not only a letter from me stating why we wanted to become a member school, but other similar letters from several staff as well as a board resolution indicating support for our application. Thus, when I learned at the 2013 fall forum of the Coalition that a new book from Sizer had been published, I was anxious to read it.

The New American High School is Ted Sizer's latest and last book, written just before his death in 2009, published by Jossey-Bass in 2013. In this book, Sizer comes full circle, cycling back twenty years to the publication of *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*, the first of an in-depth trilogy on school reform. In *Horace's Compromise*, Sizer invited a group of pioneering high schools to join him in creating the Coalition of Essential Schools, and now, in *The New American High School*, Sizer is again calling for the creation – or re-creation – of American high schools.

The foreword to Sizer's latest book is written by Deborah Meier, another prominent education reform activist and friend of the NSRF. In it, she describes the early days of the Coalition, 1983-85: "We were a small gang of maybe seven or eight schools [and] Ted's hope was that we'd grow to perhaps fifteen nationwide..." The CES website shows 77 current member schools, plus hundreds of affiliate members. In *The New American High School*, Sizer envisions a "critical mass of schools, perhaps several hundred spread across a dozen states..." This book presents his "vision of what such a future secondary education might be," not just one idea, but cre-



ative, crucially needed new approaches that are mindful of the condition of our high schools early in the 21st century. He views our secondary schools as the "oxygen of our democracy," reminding us of the 10th Common Principle of the Coalition, "Democracy and Equity," where "[the school] should model democratic practices that involve all who are directly affected by the school [staff, students, and parent/caregivers]."

The New American High School is really a collection of fifteen essays, organized into a series of chapters beginning with "The Problem" and closing with "The Prospect." In between are such chapters as "Learning," "The Language of Schooling," "Pedagogy," and

"Morality" as key dimensions of the "new" high school, as well as more practical chapters dealing with "Time," "Space and Costs," "Courses," and "Testing." But this book also is a personal memoir, as Sizer shares his own educational experiences, including his extensive teaching experiences at both the secondary and college level. As Headmaster of Phillips Academy in Andover, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, Chairman of the Education Department at Brown University, and co-principal, with his wife Nancy Faust Sizer, at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts, Sizer has considerable experience and wisdom to share.

Sizer envisions several best practice qualities in a "new" high school, which connect directly with the ten common principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. In chapter three on "Learning," Sizer describes what schools should primarily be all about:

"Learning – at least good learning – should be cumulative, one skill or idea building on another. It must stick, meaning that it is so deeply in the mind that it will be readily at hand when we need it."

Rather than memorizing rote facts, students should learn and be able to accomplish important things that are usable in a different context and at a different time. It is a process—and should be a joy, even a revelation at times—in which students are determining in large part what matters to them, what they want to learn, what will

be useful, what might be a worthy purpose, and what to do to form healthy habits. This chapter on “Learning” aligns with the first Common Principle of the Coalition, “learning to use one’s mind well.”

In chapter 4, “Differences,” Sizer speaks about inclusive assignments and different teacher styles and student learning styles. He notes that such sensitive teaching takes longer and requires teachers to know each of their students well, as “schools are not assembly lines because children are not widgets.” Here, too, he offers a series of five suggestions to teachers to help students come to grips with their own uniqueness, developing their own ethical code and life principles, such as: “Eventually, assign each student to illumine the concept of identity with an example, whether found in fiction, past reality, today’s reality, or even his or her own experience.”

Sizer goes on to pick up his theme of “Personalization” (Coalition Common Principle #4) with his perhaps familiar recommendation of an 80:1 student-to-teacher ratio. He notes, “When a student’s mastery of the material seems secure, promote her on the basis of her exhibited performance, both written and oral.” This quality is strikingly similar to CES Common Principle #6, “Demonstration of mastery: Teaching and learning should be documented and assessed with tools based on student performance of tasks.”

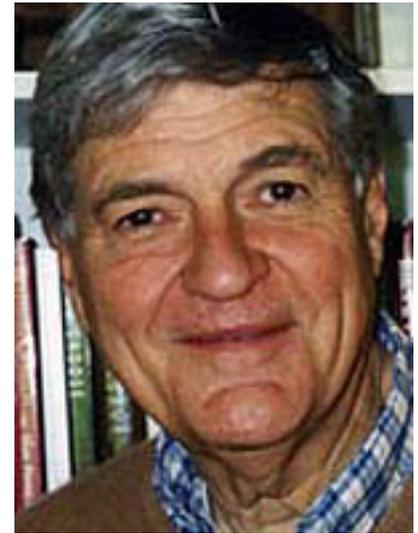
Chapter 5, “The Language of Schooling,” is particularly important to Sizer, not surprising since he was a former English teacher! He says,

“Words count. They can clarify an idea and situate it in time or place.... They can provoke objection.... Words shape the way we think, and control the vocabulary of our work. The language of schooling is influential. Often the words indicate the kind of behavior that is expected.”

What follows is an eight-page insightful discussion of some two dozen words of schooling, including “public,” “freedom,” “universality,” “safety,” “etched,” “logic,” and even “dork!” For example:

“Understanding. By this we mean ‘to know something thoroughly,’ by which we mean something mastered deeply enough to use in new contexts. If an adolescent cannot use these new learnings in important and relevant situations, he or she has not truly mastered them. To stress again: the ultimate purpose of education is to develop the ability to understand important matters well and use those matters for worthwhile personal and social ends.”

Chapter 7, “Space and Costs,” covers practical considerations for those seeking to start a new high school. However, in the best spirit of the kind of dialogue and conversations Sizer so much appreciated and enjoyed, I wish I could’ve asked him, “What about environmental and sustainability issues? Shouldn’t we be looking to build a ‘green,’ environmentally-conscious school? And shouldn’t we, at least to some degree, engage the staff, students, and parent/caregivers in the discussions of what should be the design of a new school (as called for in Principle #10 of the Coalition)?” Recently, at the Lehman Alternative Community School, the opportunity arose to expand the physical school building, and for over a year, the students, staff, and parent/caregivers engaged in conversations with the school district’s architect over just what was needed in re-shaping the existing building and creating the new addition.



Ted Sizer

Chapter 8, “Courses,” begins with a discussion of “subjects,” and could easily be related to Coalition Common Principle #2, “Less is more, depth over coverage.” Certainly the parallel is evident in his statement, “the program’s design should be shaped by the intellectual and imaginative powers and competencies that the students need, rather than by ‘subjects’ as conventionally defined.” Sizer goes on to list seven “... skills and habits that most American parents and politicians today devoutly wish that every one of our students would learn, these being the necessary minima for successful functioning in a thriving democracy:

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- 1) listening,
- 2) expressing,
- 3) empathy, sensing and evaluating,
- 4) the habit of restraint,
- 5) the habit of responsible autonomy,

6) *the habit of attending to the legitimate needs of others, friends and family members, including animals, and*

7) *the habit of wonderment, the practice of the creatively wandering mind.*”

Returning to chapter 6, “Time,” in the same spirit of dialogue and meaningful conversation I mentioned above for the chapter on “Space and Costs,” I would argue with Sizer’s affinity for the year-round, twelve months high school. Although I appreciate the argument about maximizing the use of the building, I believe students need the summer break, but not so much as the original need for young people to help agriculturally. Although my old school, the Lehman Alternative Community School, has pioneered a summer program in which youth from LACS and across the region are paid a stipend to be fully engaged in all aspects of running an extensive organic garden, producing vegetables that are marketed to the greater Ithaca community. Additionally, I believe the summer months are a crucial time for high school youth to be with their families, to develop other interests, and engage in other meaningful activities. For many high school students it also is the time for a summer internship, and paid jobs to begin saving for the costs of their future education, whether a four-year college, two-year college, or a certificate-granting one-year technical training.

In chapter 9, on “Technology,” I was pleased to see Sizer raise some of the current issues involved with all the technology tools at the disposal of our youth. For example, he notes, “All users of computers must ponder who can invade them.... Another danger for us is to depend too much on technological tools. Just because Google or Wikipedia says something is so, we must never assume that what it tells us is the answer or answers.” There also is the insightful chapter 10 on “Pedagogy,” in which Sizer speaks about the “craft of teaching,” of “teaching as an art,” and teaching as the influential “telling of stories.” Here he derives three lessons from his military training in the ROTC while a student at Harvard:

“1) Start small and select a topic that is likely to interest most students but will grow into a broader and more accessible understanding.

2) Pick the subjects carefully. Subjects must represent a class of influential happenings, not just a one-of-a-kind event.

3) *Treat the students like the adults they are becoming.*”

Throughout this book, Ted Sizer emphasizes the importance of students being prepared to be democratic citizens. In chapter 12 on “Choice,” he says, “The role of choice in the new American high school must be considered in ways both broad and historical, for at its core, choice is an important expression of democracy. By definition, freedom implies choice.” And from here, he goes on to discuss various ways to create meaningful choices for high school students.

Finally, in the closing chapter 15, “The Prospect,” the ever-optimistic Sizer says, “As long as those of us who are convinced that a new kind of American high school is required are at once patient and resilient, the future appears bright.” Then he closes with this summary statement of hope for our nation’s youth in the future: ***“We want our students to grow up to be informed, principled, and free.”*** [emphasis mine]

In her preface to the book, Ted’s wife, Nancy Faust Sizer, notes that he had colon cancer starting in 2001, then was diagnosed with metastatic (spreading) cancer in 2005. Ted Sizer died on the 21st of October 2009. We will miss him and his writings, for it was in his writings that he developed his ideas. As he put it, “I’m never sure of what I believe until I have written it.” Thanks for everything, Ted!



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