

THE
NEW AMERICAN
HIGH SCHOOL



THEODORE SIZER

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INTRODUCTION BY
NANCY FAUST SIZER

FOREWORD BY
DEBORAH MEIER

Praise for *The New American High School*

“Once again, TedSizer has written a book that will wake us up—he reminds us about the power of good questions and how that can spark a child’s interest to pursue many diverse fields and to learn in multiple ways that might surprise both the child and the teacher. I will hold it close and hear Ted’s beautiful voice reminding us that our work is worthy and urging us on to make teaching and learning better and better for all children, teachers, and communities.”

—Linda Nathan, founding headmaster, Boston Arts Academy, and executive director of the Center of Art in Education at Boston Arts Academy

“TedSizer distills a lifetime of listening into this volume. Prodding us, as he did in life, not toward a single answer but toward our most thoughtful questions and toward the schools our children deserve.”

—Kath Connolly, director of partnerships, The Learning Community, Rhode Island

“In this, his final treatise on the promise for American secondary education, TedSizer masterfully weaves his own personal narrative with a call to educators to take a hatchet to the lingering dysfunctions of schools, much as his own mother incited him to prepare the turkeys one Thanksgiving when he was a young boy. With a tenor of profound urgency, Sizer’s voice is as prescient and clear today as when we first met nearly a quarter of a century ago.”

—Jed Lippard, head of school, Prospect Hill Academy Charter School, Massachusetts

ALSO BY THEODORE R. SIZER

Secondary Schools at the Turn of the Century

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*Horace's Compromise:
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Schools and the Moral Contract (with Nancy Faust Sizer)*

*Keeping School:
Letters to Families from Principals of Two Small Schools
(with Deborah Meier and Nancy Faust Sizer)*

*The Red Pencil:
Convictions from Experience in Education*

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Cover design by Michael Cook

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Published by Jossey-Bass

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One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—
www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for and is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-118-52642-2 (cloth); ISBN 978-1-118-58498-9 (ebk.);

ISBN 978-1-118-58497-2 (ebk.)

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Foreword by Deborah Meier	vii
Preface: The Lay of the Land	xix
Introduction by Nancy Faust Sizer	xxv
1 THE PROBLEM	1
2 GROWING UP AMERICAN	15
3 LEARNING	36
4 DIFFERENCES	56
5 THE LANGUAGE OF SCHOOLING	74
6 TIME	90
7 SPACE AND COSTS	106
8 COURSES	116
9 TECHNOLOGY	135
10 PEDAGOGY	142
11 TESTING	164
12 CHOICE	181
13 FAITH	193
14 MORALITY	201
15 THE PROSPECT	221
Acknowledgments	232
Further Reading	233
About the Author	236
Index	238

FOREWORD BY DEBORAH MEIER

In every page of the book that follows, I hear the voice and heart of Ted Sizer. His way of thinking and of making sense of the world of schooling, which had such a deep impact on my life, comes through in these important pages.

• • •

In 1983, I was being pressed by former students and families to think about extending the work of the Central Park East elementary schools in East Harlem into secondary school. Our work in New York City began in the early 1970s in East Harlem, during the alternative high school movement. The general lament: “We’re doing okay in regular middle schools and high schools, *but* . . . we’ve rarely had a serious intellectually challenging or interesting experience in school since we left sixth grade.” In short: why not?

Reason one: I was a kindergarten teacher with strong views—even about secondary education—but inexperienced in educating students older than twelve, and very nervous about thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds in groups of more than two!

Reason two: I disliked the tightly prescribed Regents curriculum that New York State’s high schools had to conform to, especially if we were going to be working with students who

did not easily take to standardized testing and a fast but narrow scanning of subject matter.

Reason three: the course requirements for a diploma were a distraction when one was thinking about an intellectually serious secondary school.

Reasons two and three were especially problematic for those of us who were running progressive schools. I knew the state's requirements were not good for anyone, and my own three children's secondary school experiences reminded me of this daily. But experience also told me that foolish requirements made less difference for young people with lots of family-supported extracurricular intellectual and artistic resources than it did for the young people of East Harlem. The Regents tests are incredibly sensitive to what we lately call "social capital." If we were going to explore progressive education on a secondary school level for students who didn't come to us with all that social capital, it would have to be radically different than anything I was aware of in the public or private sector. I wanted something even better than (but similar to) the independent school I had attended. Luckily I had gone to a grade 7–12 school that I admired (Fieldston) and that I thought was almost good enough for the children who went to our elementary schools. But it seemed unlikely that I could get the support and freedom to translate that kind of education into New York's public system, city or state, much less the even more transformative example of Fieldston. (I'd also have to hurry and get a New York State–approved high school principal's license.)

Then in the early 1980s, I read an essay by TedSizer, which became part of his forthcoming book, *Horace's Compromise*. And my life changed.

Here was a man whose history was so different from my own—educationally, personally, and professionally—yet who had reached more or less the same conclusions, and moreover had taken his experience to new depths and details. If only I could carry out some of these ideas, I thought . . . Well, at first I thought mostly of his prestige and how that might help us convince the Authorities. A former Harvard dean of education (“boy wonder” and all that), an academic and author, a former principal of one of the most prestigious private prep schools, a New England WASP—and comfortable among the rich and powerful. That’s how I thought of him. But all that turned out to be the least of it.

And when I cleverly sent a message via Courtney Cazden at Harvard, who had worked with Ted when he was dean, Ted did what I later understood to be the predictable thing, knowing him as I do now. He said, “Great. Tell her to call me.” I did, and he answered the phone in that warm and welcoming voice.

And so began more than a quarter century of closely following his work and his ideas. These ideas became flesh-and-blood schools, starting with Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS). We were able to convince all the key players, and above all the state commissioner, Tom Sobel, to allow us to waive counting course credits as a requirement for graduation and to waive any existing or forthcoming Regents exams. Sobel said, “Don’t worry; I’ll be there for your first graduating class, and I’ll hand them all diplomas.”

(A commitment he carried out some years later when our first class graduated and when he signed a written agreement that has outlasted his tenure—and is still in effect twenty-five years later. He was a critical protector of some of the most successful innovators still thriving in the state, and maybe the nation.)

Sobel's bold step was not primarily based on his knowledge of my work, but rather on his knowledge of Ted's. With his support came the support of New York City's chancellor—who met with Ted (as did all subsequent chancellors—who changed often in those days). There were also meetings with the mayor, the local school board, and the United Federation of Teachers.

We seized the moment and ran with it. We pulled together a basic plan, moved Central Park East (CPE) elementary school and the yet-to-be-created CPESS into a new building, and started recruiting staff and students. The school, we decided, would be small (maximum 450 students, grades 7–12) and would operate in three “stages,” mostly based on the students' ages. Like my old high school—with its Forms I, II, and III—we had Divisions 1, 2, and 3. We decided to make each division multiage—continuing an elementary school practice in place at CPE—and to create two interdisciplinary subjects: the humanities and math/science. All students in the first two divisions were provided with the same program. It was only in Division 3, which we called the Senior Institute, that we considered holding kids for an extra year. It was when students reached age sixteen that school was organized explicitly to prepare them for the transition to “the world”—by showing the world (by presenting their work to a small

sample of that world) that the students could do the work expected of smart seventeen- to nineteen-year-olds—while also designing a plan for their post-CPESS lives. We hoped to bring Ted’s plan into a real-live public “inner-city” school. And we did.

The first things we did when we started CPESS was to design a basic structure. Ted had told us, “Keep the structure simple so that you can attend to the complexity of each student’s mind and of the subject matter you are studying.” That was the motto I kept in mind. Whenever I ran into a dilemma, I tried to choose the simplest solution and the one that kept the power close to the mutual ground we shared with students and their families.

Then we—the original seven teachers—asked ourselves what would it be that students would have to demonstrate to “us” before they received our diploma, and who would be the “us”—the judges. We sat there and tried to think of what it might mean to use our minds well—which was number one of the then nine principles. Keep it simple, Ted urged again.

We first tried listing all the things we thought every graduate should know and be able to do (that was the common language of the day) in each of our disciplinary fields. We filled every blackboard in the room in tiny print. That got us nowhere. Because once we printed it all up, everyone realized that at best we could ourselves meet only the goals in our own field—if that.

So we tried to explore the issue another way: What qualities of mind are common across all subject matter, all disciplines? What unites us intellectually? As we developed our answers to this question, we knew we were becoming

clearer about the significance of the habits we came up with and our idea that the primary function of public education was to nourish and nurture the habits needed for a strong democratic culture.

At CPESS, we settled on five “habits of mind” that crossed all disciplines. Then began the never-ending task of asking ourselves how we might go about making them accessible to all our students, and how we would judge our own and our student’s work along the way through the three divisions in about six years and, finally, as the basis for sending them across the stage with a diploma. It took hours and hours, of course, and over the first two years—while our new students were completing grades 7 and 8—we had the luxury of working carefully to see that there was continuity between what and how we taught in grades 7 through 10 and what was expected of our graduates at the end of “grade 12”—or whenever a student was “ready.”

• • •

In those first heady days in 1983–1985, we were a small gang of maybe seven or eight schools. Ted’s hope was that we’d grow to perhaps fifteen schools nationwide—schools of all types in terms of student population, governance, and so on. He was responding to the challenge so often made to his ideas: that they were utopian. We would, he believed, learn from the experiences of this small, nationwide coalition of schools what stumbling blocks we would need to overcome as well as the unexpected successes we might uncover. We would work

closely together and with him. Our network included a private school in the southwest, a Catholic school in the northeast, and several “regular” public schools—from the wealthiest suburban to the poorest rural—with unusual leaders in communities that were prepared to support them.

A similar process went on at one after another of the schools that joined the Coalition. Ted’s running commentary on our work was the steady force behind the accomplishments of the founding schools, and of others that engaged in his reforms. Fortunately, both in his books and speeches and in personal conversation, Ted told stories that helped us think these issues through—and pointed to readings that might deepen our conversations. We met annually at Brown University, told each other stories, and visited each other’s schools. Ted reminded us that the most important part of our work was in changing the nature of the conversation in schools and in the larger world.

That was his goal, and in its simplicity it was, of course, grandiose and complex.

And through his efforts, the Coalition started a magazine—*Horace*. The original editor, Kathleen Cushman, filled each issue with accounts from the field, sharing successful and unsuccessful attempts to embody the principles despite all the constraints that come with operating in reality.

In the next decades, many other schools joined our ranks; we created regions so that the schools could work more easily with each other throughout the year, but got together nationally for an annual convention whose principal presenters were the educators in our schools. Under this national umbrella,

many of our New York State and other Coalition sister schools took different paths, spurning the idea of a “model” because of Ted’s—and our own—respect for our individual communities, but agreeing about the same set of values.

• • •

I held my breath for a while: would Ted turn out to have feet of clay? It never happened. What struck me as unusual from day one was his unequivocal sympathy for the many people he encountered during his study of American high schools that led to *Horace’s Compromise*, an unusually teacher- and student-friendly book that had made me cautiously prepared to trust him. I had developed a decidedly skeptical mind-set about “academics,” but Ted belonged to that “other” category. He acknowledged their best intentions and struggled with them to imagine a different set of “compromises” that would work better for young and old alike. It was not compromises per se that he opposed, but making the wrong ones. Horace was not the villain of his piece, nor an unusual hero; rather, he was an English teacher trying his hardest to find ways to use his time and his mind to help his 130 to 150 students—a different group every semester—learn to be strong readers and writers. Ted’s book demonstrated respect for the “old-fashioned” academic virtues, even as he noted that one of the most intellectually stimulating classes he observed was a shop class.

We tried our best to follow in that spirit—not condemning our less fortunate colleagues, but doing our best to be allies in their perhaps more modest efforts at reform as well.

It struck me that Ted was approaching secondary schooling with the same mind-set that I had approached kindergarten and then elementary school. His high school dream was not so different than what I believed in for five-year-olds—to be known well, to be engaged with interesting materials and ideas in a setting of mutual respect. Poverty and racism complicate our tasks; they place some constraints on everyone involved. But we all agreed that the kind of education we offer the wealthy and talented is what we need to offer all young people. The less powerful need it even more than the already powerful. Of course, context matters, but what we sought through the Coalition of Essential Schools was a way to reach all children with the priorities, values, and intellectual stimulation that we witnessed in the best of private, independent schools. Only more so. And we hoped to do it without preselecting the most promising students or spending much more money per student than other neighboring public schools had access to.

The creation of the Coalition in the early 1980s was a critical step. We weren't alone: we were part of a movement. Ted's nine principles, which were put together after many conversations with good teachers, were unique and powerful. They represented not a recipe or model but a mind-set, principles that could be adapted to particular passions and particular situations. They almost seemed to be common sense, and we found few who disagreed with them, but many who thought they could not survive in the public sector.

For some of those whom I soon encountered, these principles were frustrating. "What does he mean by 'using his or her mind well'?" they complained. "Why doesn't he spell it

out? What does he mean by ‘decency’ or faculty autonomy?” For others, the respect for the context that each educator faces was the beauty of the Coalition framework. Ted was challenging us to have our own collective dreams, not to adopt his. And he welcomed many interpretations and thus widely variant models.

Ted went visiting often, at one school after another—probing, questioning, and always appreciating. His probes were sometimes quietly painful, but, more important, they were clearly the result of genuine curiosity and respect. They weren’t “test questions” but honest probes for himself and for us. There was never a “gotcha,” even when he was sometimes worried about our decisions. He figured that he was learning along with us. But from the start to the end, Ted’s comments almost always came only after a lot of listening and observing. That was his hallmark: through his own behaviors, he reminded us that teaching requires knowing each child well.

By the early 1990s, Ted helped others form local support groups, such as the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) in Boston. The launch of pilot schools as part of Boston’s public system was a dream come true—and we jumped on it. Ted hosted a CCE-pilot meeting at a big Boston law firm to launch our work. Before they “discovered” charters, most of the big foundation and moneyed and politically connected adults were excited about pilots. When Ted spoke, last, his simple, reassuring brilliance pulled it all together.

For the next nearly twenty years, Ted served on the CCE board and helped CCE become an organization known for trusting educators to “provide the conditions and get out of

the way,” as Larry Myatt, then principal of the first Boston Coalition School-Fenway, remembers Ted as saying. As Larry went on to write me recently, “the poobahs were barely aware that he was endorsing difference as an asset, as a natural fact of schooling, and suggesting that the locus of decision making be the school.” Ted was, in Larry’s words, an organizer. Not a word Ted said was not true to his convictions and the work we committed ourselves to.

Ted’s thinking was again brought to life in the mid-1990s as he and Nancy Sizer imagined and then helped construct their own “dream” school, along with friends and colleagues in their rural community—the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts—at just the time when I was moving to Boston to start a new K–8 school. There couldn’t have been a better omen. When Ted and Nancy acted as co-principals in Parker’s fourth year, we met often for dinner to discuss our challenges and delights, and even wrote a book, *Keeping School: Letters to Families from Principals of Two Small Schools* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) to explain our daily work.

• • •

As a reformer over many years, Ted was characterized by his enthusiasm—and his persistence. His style was refreshing. He never had answers. He simply talked aloud about what he knew—that the task of translating ideas and theories into life-size schools was a never-ending task. He knew that our work was important, that we were each trying our best under circumstances that we knew more about than he did.

(Actually, I began to doubt this.) Furthermore, we soon realized that he took it for granted that there was no finished product. We'd be analyzing and creating—making revisions upon revisions—for a lifetime and more. All our work together, then and now, fit well into my understanding of democracy—that respectful but messy idea that never finally gets it right.

PREFACE: THE LAY OF THE LAND

When I fly across our America—at least when the day is clear—I can look down and easily pick out the public high schools, the large, familiar, bulky buildings surrounded by playing fields and black-topped parking lots, some of these locations containing neat rows of yellow school buses. You cannot miss them. They are so ubiquitous that they are an integral and expected part of the country's landscape, familiar images that we all recognize coast to coast: *the lay of our land*.

These high schools, structurally similar but locally unique to their people in community after community all across America, should remind us that secondary schools such as these are one of this nation's most important social mechanisms, which, at their best, are models of democracy as well as providers of the intellectual and moral equipment for young people to survive and prosper in our culture. They are the oxygen of democracy: the one place where all of our adolescents, save some unlucky or neglected ones, have a chance to rub shoulders with young people both alike and different from themselves, a “melting pot,” as the admirers of this country have termed our communities.

The sad fact remains, however, that the design of our beloved high school as we know it has run its course, no longer serving youth as well as it once did. Indeed, in many quarters, adolescents and the schools are today even a source

of disdain, a piece of the entertainment industry that makes big money by trivializing growing up, mocking the inevitable awkwardness of this universal process, within and beyond school buildings.

We cannot escape that reality. That Americans transformed their nineteenth-century high schools and academies from a tiny group of wealthier or religiously driven institutions to places that enrolled the full teenage population was an extraordinary achievement. Free-thinking, engaged citizens—*educated people*—have long been the backbone of our culture, whether these young people lived in large cities or small towns, even hamlets in thinly populated townships. We should take satisfaction in that achievement. With hard and steady work, grassroots democracy can work.

However, if our current high schools are indeed ill-designed and inefficient, the question facing the current generation is *What next?* What can be done? Do we have the will to take on the big job that is needed to newly provide for the benefit of our young citizens, at full public expense, in ways that address the needs of the twenty-first century? We teachers need to protect what is endangered about our work, but also must add new tasks for ourselves because they are needed in our times, particularly by the vast numbers of disadvantaged children and the new ways of critical thinking that they will require to get on in the world. How can the American people prepare youth to cope with the sirens of a capitalist economy? If a place called “high school” is part of that response, what should be its mission and shape? After all these years, how can we pull off a change that challenges the past and asks us to think in new ways about growing up American?

The twentieth-century story of the spread of formal schooling for all American citizens is an extraordinary one. A comparable tale that we hope would be written fifty years from now is one that we should begin to sketch out, to use as a rough target. This book outlines one person's vision of what such a future secondary education might be. Whatever happens, whether it follows my plan or another, the task will require firmness, persistence, and wise flexibility.

• • •

My plane hits the runway with a bump. Many of the passengers let out a breath of relief. The veteran riders wake up from their sleep and start collecting their belongings from the seat pockets and awkwardly stuff them into their briefcases, elbows knocking one another. They crowd into the airplane's narrow aisles, as though pushing ahead of other passengers would get them off faster. Ultimately we all shuffle our way out.

Even now, finally within the airport, with its impatient people coming and going to this place or that, I cannot get my earlier reverie out of my mind, and I ponder what we call a "high school" might be. I grieve a bit as I understand enough about schools today to know that their current design does not work well to meet this country's expectations, and, further, I know that many politicians and most educators appear not at all ready to undertake a fresh plan. We are stuck on the old metaphors and procedures, such as the use of time as coinage, indicating that the more important a subject is, the more time it will get. We inherited a program of studies that in its overall

structure has not changed in over a century; we also inherited college- and university-based training for educators that is all too comfortable with the status quo even as its professors rail against it. There is irony here. Tinkering with what we have—a little reorganization here and a little addition there—will no longer work.

A friend suggests that the airlines themselves might be kin to the schools, places that served an earlier time but that are now outmoded. Much that we believed worked for us in our classrooms now seems less successful. Air travel worked for us, but much of the business for which we earlier flew can now be transacted over the Internet, for a tiny fraction of the earlier price.

Today I have no easy answers, no policies to suggest that are Guaranteed to Work, but I trust that the selections that follow—issues to tackle more than things to do—might suggest some sensible, persuasive moves to make. Much of what I have written here is, perhaps inevitably, a means of recollection, what a person who has labored in a field admires or finds embarrassing enough to share. At the same time, I believe that there is not, nor ever should be, one perfect educational system sent down from on high for America to put into place. Democracies should never be the seedbeds of autocratic, top-down control. Freedom is necessarily messy.

Perhaps we teachers and principals worry that we will get the new practice wrong and thus open ourselves up for more unsettling criticism. We have learned to keep our heads down and conspire primarily with our immediate colleagues. Sadly, we live today with flak coming at us from newspapers and school board meetings; some is valid, some not. Thus we are

stuck, aware of our shortcomings and those of the modern technologies that teach powerfully but that at their worst distract from what the high school values, and are confused by how to react to them. However, if we get our act together, we can do better.

This book is one attempt to give shape to the needed agenda. It is an argument as much as an analysis. Like virtually all writing, even so-called nonfiction, the words that follow are affected by my own intellectual priorities and by what I have done in my life and during my career. I make no claim for total dispassion; this writing is in part a memoir, a personal odyssey. I care deeply about what follows here.

INTRODUCTION BY NANCY FAUST SIZER

Ted Sizer was a communicator. His relationship with his readers was faithful and impassioned—on both sides. At the reception after his memorial service, I was doing pretty well at remembering people and their names, but I caught sight of a stranger in the long line and worried about him until he reached me. Was he from Harvard? Brown? Parker? The Coalition? Luckily, he didn't ask me if I remembered him, but he gave me a hug. "I read his books," he explained, never told me his name or anything else, and moved on.

Ted returned the favor. In the Horace books, he spoke from his own heart, determined to take on a complicated topic and describe it in such a way as to gather comrades for the work ahead. He founded the Coalition of Essential Schools to be the institution that would help to meet his—and his readers'—challenge. His operation for colon cancer in 2001 barely slowed him down, and *The Red Pencil* was published in 2004. In the months and years after his devastating diagnosis of metastatic cancer in 2005, he kept on working to keep himself and others abreast of what he was thinking. "I'm never sure of what I believe," he said, "until I have written it." Though he was terribly frustrated with computers—his long, broad fingers played havoc with keyboards, until we finally found the biggest one sold and put down cardboard barriers where his fingers weren't supposed to stray—they were actually

designed for writers like him; they allowed him to write and rewrite to his heart's content. And he was very content with any day when there was time and energy enough to spend on his book.

After a few trial runs—many months spent considering and reconsidering vocabulary, for example, which has greatly influenced the book—he decided that he would like to advise others who were designing what they hoped would be successful schools, at least for the collections of students whom they would teach. We have known many such people at Brown and the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Parker School, and this would help them change their schools or found new ones.

His book—and his advice—would encourage all of us who are interested in education that we are doing what he liked to call “the work of the Lord.” Surely if there is any point to life, it is to nourish and prepare the next generation, as personally as possible. The book would consider policy only in the ways that it influences daily work, and in it are many ideas about how daily work might proceed. He was still very interested in policy, but toward the end of his career, he came back to its beginning, and to individual kids.

Along the way, partly because I nagged him about it, he added autobiographical details that explained the sources of many of his ideas. He was a very modest man, but I persuaded him that readers who knew more about his life would understand his message more deeply.

So here are his last thoughts. A few are about his illness, but that's where he was, in part, and his courage in facing it is part of his legacy. The rest of his thoughts were with you,