

Theodore R.Sizer



# HORACE'S HOPE

WHAT WORKS FOR  
THE AMERICAN  
HIGH SCHOOL

*Theodore R.Sizer*

# HORACE'S HOPE

What Works for the  
American High School

Houghton Mifflin Company

Boston New York

Copyright © 1996 by Theodore R.Sizer  
All rights reserved

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book,  
write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company, 215 Park Avenue South,  
New York, New York 10003.

For information about this and other Houghton Mifflin trade and reference books and  
multimedia products, visit The Bookstore at Houghton Mifflin on the World Wide Web  
at <http://www.hmco.com/trade/>.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Sizer, Theodore R.

Horace's hope : what works for the American high school / Theodore R. Sizer  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. )

ISBN 0-395-73983-7

1. High Schools — United States. 2. Education, Secondary — United States —  
Aims and objectives. 3. Educational change — United States. I. Title.

LA222.S543 1996

373.73 — dc20 95-47702 CIP

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

*Books by Theodore R.Sizer*

Secondary Schools at the Turn of the Century

The Age of the Academies (*ed.*)

Religion and Public Education (*ed.*)

Moral Education: Five Lectures  
(*ed., with Nancy F. Sizer*)

Places for Learning, Places for Joy:  
Speculations on American School Reform

Horace's Compromise:  
The Dilemma of the American High School

Horace's School:  
Redesigning the American High School

Horace's Hope:  
What Works for the American High School

For my wife, Nancy; for our children,  
Tod and Rebecca, Judy, Hal and Susan, and Lyde and Jim;  
for our grandchildren, Cally, Lyde, Teddy, Julie, and Nicholas;  
and especially for Jay and David, members of our family  
who have arrived since Horace Smith set about  
redesigning Franklin High School

## *Preface*

### Horace Smith

HORACE SMITH is a veteran high school English teacher, respected by his colleagues, revered by some of his students, and compulsive in his love of his trade and the place at which he plies it, Franklin High School.

Horace is not a real person but my invention, an amalgam of teachers whom I met during visits to secondary schools across the country during the early 1980s. For my purposes, he represents the best of the teaching force. Horace is male and female, black and white and Asian and Latino, a science teacher, a coach, a counselor, a mathematics teacher. If there could be an Every High School U.S.A., Franklin High School would be that.

In watching and listening to Horace Smith (in his myriad manifestations) fifteen years ago, I saw with ever-increasing clarity the compromises forced on him by his school's familiar regimen, compromises that profoundly and negatively affected his work. Horace knew that the routines of the school forced him to teach in ways that he knew were second class. That is, he had to compromise his standards.

Each year he had 120 different youngsters to get to know. He saw each one fleetingly almost every day, but almost always as part of a class with twenty to thirty other kids. Each class was but a sliver of time, forty-plus minutes preceded and followed by bells and bedlam in the

## Preface

hallways. Horace knew some of his students well but most of them only as semi-strangers passing through. He put up a good front, though. *I know my kids*, he would tell everyone, especially their parents. He knew that this was a lie but could not bring himself to admit it.

The school processed those young people, marching them through a school day that rarely changed its shape or pace, organizing them by their ages and the scores they made on tests, rewarding them on the basis of grades that represented no common standard among Franklin High School's faculty, and passing them on to college or work on the basis of credentials that were part fibs, part truths, and a nest of numbers which had little correlation with the talents and commitments that were actually necessary in the lives to which they were all headed.

Orderliness in the school was a fetish. Quiet was golden. A "good" class had children leaning over their desks, appearing to work diligently. The fact that most were quietly bored or seething with resentment or simply turned off made no difference. Most of Franklin's kids merely went through the expected motions. Getting the diploma was a goal for many of them, and they knew that if they appeared to be dutiful, showed up, and did something in class, they would collect their credits and graduate. Like their predecessors, Horace and his colleagues simply let them get away with that. To fight for something better would call for an enormous battle. The public and the profession preferred to let the sleeping dog of mindless schoolwork lie.

Franklin High School tried hard to be everything to everyone. The list of school goals was as long as it was pretentious, running from the academic to the personal, from mastery of science to the development of self-confidence and a principled life. The school day was a jumble of activities, and the most prominent students were involved in a blizzard of programs — AP physics, cheerleading, the yearbook, the homecoming committee, choir, senior social studies, and more, all at once. The more you did, the better. The quality of the academic and extracurricular work was an afterthought, save in a few places such as varsity athletics. For a student, being busy in all sorts of activity was a virtue, being known for this breathless visibility was a jewel.

Horace understood all this busy overload of obligations. He spoke of

it rarely, however. The basic incongruity, even mindlessness, of the Franklin regimen represented too much to confront at once.

Franklin's daily schedule was a marvel of complexity. Every teacher had to lope from this to that to keep up. Twenty minutes for lunch, if you were lucky. No time to talk with colleagues at length about anything of importance. Barely enough time after school to read and grade all those students' papers, not to mention work at the second job that many teachers had to take on to meet their families' budgets.

How then could anyone change such a diabolically complicated system? Tackling one piece would affect every other piece. The political wars within the school and among each program's special-interest groups would be ferocious. Sorting out this complexity and setting sensible priorities would take faculty time, of which there was little.

The traditional system seemingly conspired against change, and it was not only the school boards' and administrators' fault. The union leaders, Horace's close friends, tacitly accepted the mindlessness as much as any other group. The colleges' education professors went along too, preparing recruits in the old ways for jobs that Horace knew they could never do well. Horace found few kindred spirits with whom to ally in any sort of bold effort. The widely heralded reform initiatives from the policy community rarely addressed the debilitating compromises. These initiatives appeared to Horace to be voices from afar, singing worthy songs that spoke barely at all to high schools as they in fact were.

At root, apparently, was the implicit belief that significant reform was impossible. High school was high school. There could be tinkering here, a modestly new course of study there, an after-school program added, new tests applied, new curriculum frameworks distributed, fiery speeches given by outraged political leaders, fingers pointed. However, the compromises of the past would remain the compromises of the future. Whatever new directives came from above, they would have to be addressed within the existing system, and the existing system was overloaded, dysfunctional, and shaped to make almost any change exceedingly difficult to accomplish.

Yet, perhaps paradoxically, Horace Smith kept going. He found ways



## Preface

to provide some of his students with a serious education, in Horace's case within Franklin High School's theater program. It was his delight in the accomplishment and friendship of these adolescents that brought him sustaining energy. "Let me tell you about . . .," he would say to me, and the story of a particular youngster would tumble out. However, only a fraction of the children could become such a particular person for Horace. There was not time, nor did the school give any incentive for such attention. He resented that so much that he barely acknowledged it.

Horace Smith provides the lens through which I have viewed American secondary education over the past decade and a half. Such a perch was and is natural for me. In 1981 I had just completed nine years as a high school principal and history teacher, and I was intensely aware of the nature and craft of school-keeping, the incessant, fascinating dailiness of that craft, and the wonderful specialness of adolescents. The lens fit.

The angle from which one views schools matters. Horace's compromises, and the need to address them, have provided for me not only the scaffolding of an argument but a set of priorities, ones that inform what is now a large reform effort, the Coalition of Essential Schools. Horace's angle of vision has encouraged me to pursue change in ways somewhat different from traditional reform activity. I respect the wonderful (and inevitable) idiosyncrasy of each school. Accordingly, I take a less precise tack than what is generally expected — less prescriptive, driven more by persuasion than by pressure, primarily dependent on the initiative of the Horace Smiths and the culture of the localities where the particular schools are.

Of course, the view from the classroom is not the only view to take; but it is a crucial view. Horace's compromises have been seriously ignored in action, if not in discussion, about American educational policy. Failure to understand what bedevils Horace Smith and then to do something about it guarantees the failure of reform. Such a view colors the very name of our Coalition's effort — *essential* schools.

I have written in *Horace's Compromise* of the high schools as I saw them during my 1980s travels. In 1992 I published a portrait (*Horace's School*) of what one specific approach to addressing those compromises might take, an example of an Essential school. *Horace's Hope* is my

meditation on what we may have learned over the last years of serious effort at high school reform.

Seeing reform primarily through Horace's eyes has provoked several themes, ones that this book deals with in some detail.

The heart of schooling is found in relationships between student, teacher, and ideas. Kids differ, and serious ideas affect each one in often interestingly different ways, especially as that child matures.

Horace painfully knows that one cannot teach a student well if one does not know that student well. If the task is the mere memorization of simple lists, maybe, or the development of a routine skill. Serious understanding of an important and complex issue, the stuff of good secondary education? Rarely, if ever.

Parents as well as teachers know this. Private schools and schools in affluent suburbs know this ("We offer small classes"). Every parent I have dealt with in forty years of teaching, without exception, has expected me to know her or his child well. This is a sensible and reasonable expectation.

The traditional assembly-line metaphor for schooling does not work. Kids are not on conveyer belts, with teachers hanging knowledge on them as they pass by. Schools do not "deliver instructional services," pumping up intellectual tires and delivering pedagogical pizza. Children — blessedly — are more complicated and thus more interesting than that.

The existing apparatus of testing ("assessment" is the word in vogue) is seriously flawed, giving us at best snippets of knowledge about a student and at worst a profoundly distorted view of that child. Americans have long put too much dependence on the fledgling science of testing — the plumbing of a human mind and the prediction of the future capability of that mind — and never more so than at present.

There is virtually no evidence, save at the extremes, that most of the scores of which we make so much correlate very much at all with a young person's future activity in life. Alas, in spite of this, the political and administrative need for simple measures swamps common sense about what can be measured and how.

Horace is left with the difficult business of carefully observing and

assessing each student's actual work. He deals in the academic realm in the same one-by-one way — looking at each student's real performance — that athletic coaches and music teachers do. No coach ever fielded a team and no music teacher ever assembled an orchestra on the basis of a set of scores. It is the student's actual and sustained performance on the field or behind the tuba that counts, not just what that student did with a pencil and paper at one sitting. Horace deeply resents the categorization of his students' minds on such a basis.

I have learned that being vocally skeptical of tests labels me as being “against standards.” Such a charge is bizarre. Low-standard assessment in the quest for high standards is a terrible irony, and inflicting it on children is an outrage.

America's fetish about tests masks profound differences of opinion about the academic ends of education, especially in the senior high school. Horace copes with this daily. Is it enough merely to know that Richard Nixon was president from 1969 to 1974, when he resigned? Or are the facts that led to his resignation important too? And what about the facts made available in the books at school: does Franklin High School's library have all of the data necessary to explain fully what happened, and if not, what facts are yet to be gathered? Indeed, what might a “fact” in this situation be? What does the matter of Nixon's resignation tell us about the American presidency, about the culture of the early 1970s, about our political system? How, then, does one approach Oliver Stone's movie *Nixon*? Does carefully studying Nixon's final months in the White House imbue a young person with the habit of looking at such a major political happening — with skepticism, reserve, an understanding about such matters?

Horace believes that all such levels of understanding and habit are important, necessary objectives for a senior high school. Many disagree with him, asserting that the “facts” alone are what school should be about. A student's opinion and how he assembles and supports it, they say, are beyond the scope of school. School is about What Is. Others may say that because we cannot measure habits, they should have no bearing on an assessment of a student's merit. Still others will argue that a student's habits are not the school's business.

The recent national debates over educational standards have served

to reveal some of these differences. They are profound ones. Horace lives with them daily. He resents those who imply that America clearly agrees on what the substance and standard of serious schooling in fact might be.

Horace also knows that adolescents gain much of their education outside school. They will spend more hours with Richard Nixon at *Nixon* than they will in class. They hear more and experience more in the street, on a job, at home, from the television, from the computer than in school. Going to school for many kids is an expected routine, little more. Horace engages his classes in conversations that are profoundly influenced by the talk of the street and over the air and via the telephone lines. Oprah and O.J., the video arcade and the Internet count, big time. Against them, Horace has a struggle.

Franklin High School is part of a school system. Horace knows that system's strength. It decides what he will be paid and when he will work, gives him what it thinks he needs, and shelters him from the public. At its best, it struggles to lessen his compromises. Usually it is simply fickle. Its leaders, often estimable men and women, come and go with alarming speed. Able though most are, the boat that they are asked to steer is built to swamp them any time they stray too far from accepted courses.

The stability in public education comes from the extraordinary inertia of traditional practice. Pressure for change, whether wise or unwise, ultimately emerges as hiccups — a new curriculum is recommended here, a new test there, some interesting professional development somewhere else — but by and large leaves the schools' design and routines much as they are now. Bolder change would shake up one or another pressure group and would thus require sustained leadership. Those whom the system usually accepts as its stakeholders seem to be arranged to check one another continually, to cancel any initiative. When Horace bothers to think at all about this issue (which is rarely), he wonders why some of those who claim to be stakeholders — people who are not directly affected by decisions in schools — deserve the attention and power the system affords them. Those who have to live with the compromises should, he muses, have a greater incentive to change them.

## *Preface*

There is no standard Franklin High. The people who are Horace teach in many settings, and the differences among them, usually defined by the economic class of the students, are striking. "Equal educational opportunity" is a cruel joke, Horace knows. Districts with schools with puny libraries abut districts that have schools with vast libraries. Some schools are palaces, some are leaky relics of decades of neglect. The savage inequality of which Jonathan Kozol so powerfully wrote is so deeply established in American school practice that it plays remarkably little role in public discussion.<sup>1</sup> Horace pays little attention to it; it is just the way we do things in this country, he implies. Inequality is the one best expression of local control.

Someone like me who has the luxury of traveling among schools sees this inequity powerfully. If America has any civic standards, two of the most important are fairness and generosity. Both of these are mocked by the practice of American education. No other industrial nation in the world tolerates such inequities. No other industrial nation will pay so heavily for their long-range costs. That reality alone should be an embarrassment for Americans. However, we largely shrug it off. There seems little rage here, not even in Horace, who is fully occupied with trying to confront the needs in his own back yard.

And yet Horace has hope. He is stubborn. His students are remarkably resilient. He knows why he gets up in the morning: the careers of many of his students are sweet dividends to his life. He enjoys many of his colleagues, especially those who like to learn, to think, to use language, to figure out kids. Even the mordant among them have kept a sense of humor and a willingness to work hard. The carping cynics, so familiar, can be tolerated.

In recent years, there has been some movement. Some of the plans for Franklin High School did take root, ones that addressed the most nagging compromises. People like Horace in other Franklin High Schools appeared to be ready to move beyond their restlessness, and they found unexpected support among some parents of their students. Their collective activity — the result of the boiling-over of impatience with the compromises — had promise. The larger system, strangled in its own problems, lacked the will either to stifle or vigorously to pro-

mote serious new ideas. There was in effect a vacuum. The hope resided there, in the belief that such a vacuum could be constructively filled.

Horace knew that all this would take time, particularly because the changes contemplated were not merely ones of structure and practice. They affected the very way teachers and students and parents viewed serious secondary education. The reform was above all a reform of ideas. That would take a generation to root, and the rooting would be uneven and messy. However, it would be fundamental, and fundamental change is what Horace knew was required.

From such a schoolteacher's vantage point was this book written. It is only one vantage point. However, none is more important.

*Note:* A fuller account of *A Study of High Schools*, from which *Horace's Compromise* emerged, and the Coalition of Essential Schools appears in the appendix.

As in my two previous Horace books, I have used the device of nonfiction fiction. Save for the portraits of a few Essential schools — ones chosen from among dozens of equally revealing examples — that fall between chapters, all the descriptions of real schools, teachers, and students are masked and sometimes interwoven. The resulting word pictures are thus imaginary, but in their details they are wholly real. This writer's device allows me to render descriptions that are to my most careful eye authentic without making sharp and thus sometimes unflattering identifications.

# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Preface: Horace Smith                       | ix  |
| 1 A Story Where Nothing Happens             | 1   |
| ♦ <i>A Place Where Something Happened</i>   | 18  |
| 2 There Is More to It than Just the Schools | 23  |
| ♦ <i>Massive Middle Schools</i>             | 30  |
| 3 The Words of Reform                       | 34  |
| ♦ <i>New Schools in Suburbia</i>            | 51  |
| 4 The Work of Reform                        | 56  |
| ♦ <i>A System of Schools</i>                | 70  |
| 5 What Matters                              | 76  |
| ♦ <i>New Practice from New Evidence</i>     | 107 |
| 6 Troublesome Complexities                  | 110 |
| ♦ <i>The Good New Days</i>                  | 127 |
| 7 Horace's Hope                             | 130 |

*Contents*

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Appendix A: The Coalition of Essential Schools  | 151 |
| Appendix B: The Coalition of Essential Schools:<br>A National Research Context<br><i>by Margaret M. MacMullen</i> | 160 |
| Appendix C: Members of the Coalition<br>of Essential Schools  | 177 |
| Acknowledgments   | 187 |
| Notes   | 191 |



# 1

## A Story Where Nothing Happens

GIVEN ALL the controversy over the past two decades about the effectiveness of American high schools, I have wondered just what has changed as a result of all the public and political concern. My hunch — widely shared, sad to say — was that not much had altered. To test this hunch informally, during the fall of 1994 I revisited several schools I had gone to in 1981 as part of my research for *A Study of High Schools*. I wanted to sense what was different and what was the same there, and to learn whether all the talk about reform had made a difference and if so, what was visibly different.

I chose a few schools with which I had had no intervening contact, places that were not members of the Coalition of Essential Schools or an analogous effort. That is, these were typical schools, pressing forward in ordinary ways, subject to their districts' and states' authority without any particular, focused outside force, resources, or advocacy.

One in particular stood out as representative: Tillson High School, which in 1981 was the largest secondary school in a major industrial city. Thirty-eight hundred young people then filled its sprawling building, a vast and impressive structure barely able to contain even those students actually in attendance. Crowds of adolescents dominated the hallways, noisy, jovial, pushing and joshing.

The cabdriver who took me from my hotel out to the school that