

Why School Reform Efforts Have Failed: School Reform Needs to Be Based on a Set of Core Principles

Fred C. Lunenburg
Sam Houston State University

ABSTRACT

School improvement has been studied extensively for more than two decades, but change in schools has been problematic. Our reform efforts need to be based on a set of core principles. One initiative that begins to address this idea is the Coalition of Essential Schools. The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) is an organization created to further a type of whole-school reform originally envisioned by TheodoreSizer in his book, *Horace's Compromise*. CES began in 1984 with twelve schools. It currently has 600 formal members. Although the ways of implementing these core beliefs of Essential Schools may differ, the principles do provide a framework for school reform.

Although school reform has been ubiquitous for the past century, little of significance has changed (Hess, 2011; Nehring & Cuban, 2010). Since the advent of compulsory education, neither the technology nor the core beliefs of schooling has changed substantively (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Evans, 2010). Our reform efforts need to be based on a set of core principles that help its participating schools to identify with ideas larger than the individual, the classroom, the school, or the community (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2012; Hille, 2011; Tharp, 2007). A recent initiative that begins to address these ideas is the Coalition of Essential Schools. Although the ways of implementing these core beliefs of Essential Schools may differ, the principles do provide a framework for school reform.

Core Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools

The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), a project intended to restructure the nature of secondary education, forms its core principles from the work of TheodoreSizer (1984, 1997a, 1997b, 2004a, 2004b), who served as chair of CES. Since its formation in 1984, the Coalition of Essential Schools now includes over 600 schools in 40 states, and several Canadian provinces. Schools that have projects under way are reporting

encouraging results, especially in urban settings, in some of the simple measures, including increased attendance, decreased dropout rates, higher test scores, and fewer discipline problems (Ancess, 2004; Feldman, Lopez, & Simon, 2006; Littky, 2005; Meier, 2003; Schlechty, 2011a,b; Simon, 2002; Sizer, 2005; Sizer, Sizer, & Meier, 2005; Weinbaum, Allen, Blythe, Seidel, Simon, & Rubin, 2005).

The mission of coalition-member schools is to create an intellectual environment in which instruction is personalized and students are responsible for their own learning. The goal is that each student who graduates from high school will have the ability to think, inquire, and reason. Although coalition-member schools have no blueprint to go by, all subscribe to a set of 10 core principles (Sizer, 1984, 1997a, 1997b, 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

Personalized Instruction

Teaching and learning should be personalized, with teachers and principals responsible for what is studied, how time is spent, and what materials and pedagogies are used. The teacher load should not exceed 80 students. For the most part, coalition schools have restructured the school day so they can teach fewer students for longer periods of time. For example, 80 students might take part in a common core program taught by four teachers for four hours each day. Curriculum and instruction in the core would be interdisciplinary, covering language arts, mathematics, social science, and science. One teacher might assume responsibility for each area of the curriculum, and teachers would have complete discretion over how much time to devote to the teaching of each subject. Built into each teacher's schedule would be an hour of team planning. Such a configuration might occur school-wide or in a school-within-a-school structure.

Student as Worker, Teacher as Coach

The governing metaphor of the school should be student as worker, not teacher as deliverer of instructional services. Working in a coalition school requires a radical change in the way teachers think of themselves. Phillip Schlechty (2011a) has captured the essence of this metaphor in his recently published book *Engaging Students: The Next Level of Working on the Work*. Instead of being intellectual authorities standing in front of a class telling, explaining, clarifying, and helping students to understand what they know, teachers act as coaches and facilitators who guide and prod their students, who, in turn, are responsible for identifying a problem, developing hypotheses, reasoning, and drawing their own conclusions. Just as the coach of an athletic team does not perform for the player, the teacher cannot perform for the student. The student is an active participant in the learning situation. Sizer asserts that students do not learn well when they are passive spectators in the classroom. They need a clear goal that they are expected to reach by actively asking questions, finding solutions, and demonstrating their knowledge (Sizer, 2004a, 2005).

A “Thinking” School

The school should focus on helping adolescents to learn to use their minds well. It is a core principle that reminds teachers that all courses for all students should be designed to maximize the use of higher-order thinking skills. The idea, Sizer asserts, is to get a student to function effectively in a learning environment that requires intellectual rigor and creativity.

Less is More

Each student should master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge. The word essential in the name of the national network means determining what is essential in the curriculum. Observers of coalition schools are immediately struck by the apparent lack of course electives. When a school offers too many electives, essential courses can get diminished. When a single course is overloaded with content, material tends to be covered, not learned. And since teachers are expected in coalition schools to teach across disciplines, offering a proliferation of courses could result in scheduling problems and pedagogical confusion. Sizer asserts that the more complicated a school’s program, the less likely it is that serious intellectual learning will take place (Sizer, 2004a, 2005).

Generalists First, Specialists Second

The principal and teachers should perceive themselves as generalists first and specialists second. Unlike most high schools, teachers in coalition schools are committed to integrating curricula across disciplines and to combining classes as often as possible. Coalition teachers think of themselves as generalists who can teach a broad range of subjects rather than as experts in a given field. This means not only that teachers teach across disciplines, but also that they approach their disciplines as generalists, in other words that they find interesting ways to introduce specialized material to a general population (Sizer, 2004a, 2005).

Diploma by Exhibition

The diploma should be awarded upon successful demonstration of mastery. Coalition members believe that getting the right answer is not all that is important. More important is that students can show how they arrive at an answer and articulate the reasoning required to reach the conclusion. This approach is best demonstrated through an exhibition, which can take a variety of forms: an oral presentation, a written report, a rap song, a role-playing skit, a musical rendition, or a portfolio of materials. In coalition schools, there is no such thing as a failing grade. Students are required to complete their work satisfactorily no matter how long it takes. Students keep trying until they have completed the task satisfactorily. The problem experienced by coalition teachers is the number of incompletes on some student’s records, as they move forward in other classes.

Intellectual Education for All

The school's goals should apply to all students. At coalition schools, there are no college-bound, general, or vocational tracks. All students are expected to reach the same goals in the same course of study. According to Sizer, coalition schools take a Jeffersonian view that, aside from a small percentage of students with profound special needs, every student has a mind; and democracy depends on the wise use of that mind. Sizer says that our whole system of government depends on the wisdom of the individual citizen (Sizer, 2004a, 2005). These sentiments are consistent with Mortimer Adler's (2010) *Paideia Program*.

Tone of Expectation, Trust, and Decency

The tone of the school should stress un-anxious expectation, trust, and decency. Coalition schools build a sense of camaraderie, collegueship between teachers and students. Teachers and students in coalition schools don't view themselves as being on separate sides of the fence. Such an environment leads to a sense of mutual commitment and responsibility for the achievement of the school's goals.

Budgets That Support Core Principles

Ultimate administrative and budget targets should allow for student loads per teacher of 80 or fewer, time for team planning, and competitive salaries. Since coalition schools are designed to be realistic models of what all public schools should be, it is important for members to demonstrate that they can achieve the core principles within a reasonable budget. The goal is to operate a coalition school on a budget slightly over 10 percent of the norm. Because start-up costs are actually higher because of research and development of an essential curriculum, additional funding may be necessary. Funds are typically appropriated by the school district, from grants, or with the help of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Democracy and Equity

The school should demonstrate non-discriminatory and inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogies. It should model democratic practices that involve all who are directly affected by the school. The school should honor diversity and build on the strength of its communities, deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity.

Conclusion

School improvement has been studied extensively for more than two decades, but change in schools has been problematic. Our reform efforts need to be based on a set of core principles. One initiative that begins to address this idea is the Coalition of Essential Schools. The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) is an organization created to further a

type of whole-school reform originally envisioned by TheodoreSizer in his book, *Horace's Compromise*. CES began in 1984 with twelve schools. It currently has 600 formal members. CES is at the forefront of creating and sustaining personalized, equitable, and intellectually challenging schools. Coalition schools are places of powerful learning where all students have the chance to reach their fullest potential.

References

- Adler, M. J. (2010). *The paideia program*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Ancess, J. (2004). *Beating the odds: High schools as communities of commitment*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Bulach, C., Lunenburg, F. C., & Potter, L. (2012). *Creating a culture for high-performing schools: A comprehensive approach to school reform*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *From inequality to quality: Reviving our public schools*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Evans, R. W. (2010). *The hope for American school reform*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Feldman, J., Lopez, L., & Simon, K. G. (2006). *Choosing small: The essential guide to successful high school conversion*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hess, F. M. (2011). *The same thing over and over: How school reformers get stuck in yesterday's ideas*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hille, T. (2011). *Modern schools: A century of design for education*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Littky, D. (2005). *The big picture: Education is everyone's business*. Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Meier, D. (2003). *In schools we trust: Creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Nehring, J., & Cuban, L. (2010). *The practice of school reform: Lessons from two centuries*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Schlechty, P. C. (2011a). *Engaging students: The next level of working on the work*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Schlechty, P. C. (2011b). *Leading for learning: How to transform schools into learning organizations*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Simon, K. G. (2002). *Moral questions in the classroom: How to get kids to think deeply about real life and their school work*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sizer, T. R. (1984). *Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sizer, T. R. (1997a). *Horace's school: Redesigning the American high school*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Sizer, T. R. (1997b). *Horace's hope: What works for the American high school*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Sizer, T. R. (2004a). *Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

- Sizer, T. R. (2004b). *Breaking ranks II: Strategies for leading high school reform*. New York, NY: DIANE Publishing.
- Sizer, T. R. (2005). *The red pencil: Convictions from experience in education*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sizer, T. R., Sizer, N. F., & Meier, D. (2005). *Keeping school: Letters to families from principals of two small schools*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Tharp, J. M. (2007). *Breaking the cycle of failed school reform: What failed reforms tell us*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Weinbaum, A., Allen, D., Blythe, T., Seidel, S., Simon, K., & Rubin, C. (2005). *Teaching as inquiry: Asking hard questions to improve teacher practice and student achievement*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.