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Theodore R. Sizer. *Horace's Hope: What Works for the American High School.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996. v + 198 pp. $22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-395-73983-9.

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A Direction for American Education

I teach American History in a high school built for 1,500 students and now housing around 1,800, scheduled to climb to 2,040 next year. My classes average from 30-35 students with a total load of around 160–give or take a few. Remove the electronics (computers, video equipment, and so on), and the school is almost identical in its form, schedule, and subjects taught to that which my father attended in the 1930s. For all of the wailing and gnashing of teeth that has surrounded schools in the United States through this century (the Progressive Ear, the 1920s, during World War II, after *Sputnik* (which spawned *Why Johnny Can't Read*), in the 1960s (which gave us *Summerhill*), and after publication of the "Nation at Risk," almost nothing has changed. Criticism of the schools and concomitant reform efforts have permeated American History[1]. Despite that, the schools remain essentially unchanged.

Theodore Sizer, the recently retired dean of the Annenburg School of Education at Brown University and head of the Coalition of Essential Schools movement (one of a number of similar contemporary school-improvement thrusts), is part of an ongoing effort to improve education in the United States. *Horace's Hope* is the third of Sizer's books which use Horace Smith, a high school English teacher, as a lens through which Sizer shows what is (bad), and what can be (good) in education. What can be is what Horace "hopes" for and the Coalition of Essential Schools (explained with eight goals in one of the appendices) serves as the model.

It all sounds so good when Sizer, through a series of short vignettes scattered among the otherwise descriptive chapters, demonstrates the success of various "essential" schools. These show the reader how it can be. For example, in the essential school, enthusiastic teachers work together making decisions from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. "Gusto counts," Sizer tells us (p. 95). Students are energized, they are held to high standards, and they succeed. The community, once acquainted with stunning results, supports the new configuration, although their initial resistance presents a formidable hurdle. Large schools are divided into a series of schools-within-schools (as is the case with Hope High School in Providence, Rhode Island, the Essential School's pilot high school). For Sizer, big is bad. Intimate and small is good. Excited teachers full of energy are good. Tired teachers, going through the motions bogged down with bureaucracy are bad.

In Sizer's essential schools, the teaching load is never more than 80 students–half what I and the majority of teachers nation-wide see daily. Students who fight or use drugs are removed, permanently–something that the public schools where I and most teachers work cannot do because of various laws and court decisions. The principal is present, and knows the students. He or she is a leader taking a stimulating hand in daily operations. This is not the real world where principals are out of their buildings frequently due to meetings and other commitments. If I see my building principal once a week, and if I speak to her much more than once a month, I consider that fortunate. In large public schools, this is standard. While Sizer warns that change to the new configuration, with direction from the teachers, is very difficult, he underestimates the difficulty. Financial constraints in a time when voters are repeatedly told that their tax burdens are too high, make massive shifts to Sizer's world highly unlikely.

Sizer's model is unabashedly liberal and, as such, runs contrary to the current conservative thrust seen in education nationally. He envisions enrollments, now constrained by district boundaries, opened to all students state-wide. This would be an effort to accomplish increased racial and economic diversity. He makes no accounting of how this would affect the composition of sports teams or transpiration patterns, let along the flight of the wealthy to private schools. Sizer advocates making families a vital member of the school community.

Where I teach, if thirty percent of the parents attend the annual "Back-to-School Night" we feel a great success. Getting parents involved, beyond those already active, is also more difficult than Sizer admits. He also admits that his work is based largely on his observations and ideas rather than on research.

Sizer's vision will undoubtedly have an impact on education. Ambitious administrators read his works, and attempt to act on his suggestions. This will bring some changes. So did the once advant-garde *Summerhill* in the late 1960s among others. But these are largely "ivory tower" dreams that Horace hopes for, and now and then Sizer alludes to the fact that he realizes this. After reading this book, I urge educators to consult Lawrence Steinberg's heavily-researched *Beyond the Classroom* for a more pragmatic view of what ails American education, and what can be done about it.

Notes:

[1]. See Carl F. Kaestle, "The Public Schools and the Public Mood," in *American Heritage* 41 (February 1990), pp. 66-81.

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