



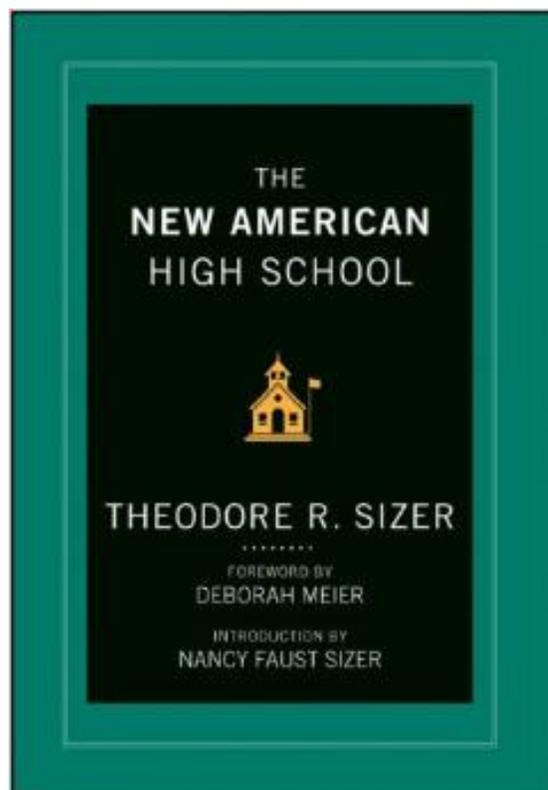
Sizer, T. (2013). *The new American high school*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Pp. 272

ISBN: 978-1118526422

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One of the last published photographs of Theodore (Ted) Sizer reveals much about the man and his work. It's tucked into the final pages of Sam Chaltain's collective book *Faces of Learning* (2011) where Sizer offers a coda of sorts, a closing thought on the ideas of the text. With a broad, smiling face, Sizer leans forward in his wheelchair, with a cane raised in a "Charge!" pose, a knit hat on his head, happily propelled by his partner Nancy. It's an image of kinetic energy, forward motion, possibility and hope, an encapsulation of a life philosophy and belief in schools. Sizer, sadly, lost his battle with colon cancer on October 21st, 2009. With his death, a wise, thoughtful, radical, teacher, scholar and writer went to his final rest. Thankfully a true voice of educational transformation was not silenced but lives on in the pages of his many books. A thinker and writer till the end, even while struggling through cancer, he continued to ask the important questions, to explore schools, talk to teachers, students and parents and thankfully for us, to write about it. His final tome, *The New American High School*, is an extension of the hope and possibility expressed in the photograph, in all its strengths and weaknesses.



Before going forward with this review I have an admission to make. I'm a fan. I'm a fan of Ted Sizer, the man, the scholar, the teacher and the entire Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) project. My first teaching position was at a CES school. It's where I was first introduced to the terms and concepts "exhibition," "essential question," and "Socratic Seminar." In the decade and a half since, I taught at a large urban high school in Los Angeles striving to embed CES principle's inside my traditional classroom. I've attended at least 13 CES Fall Forums, the organization's annual conference, and have presented at many of them. I even met and chatted briefly with Sizer and his wife Nancy at the last Fall Forum he attended, bald from chemotherapy, wearing a Frances W. Parker ball cap, where he and Nancy had been co-principals, and a smile. Professional developments I've run, and university courses I've taught have all had elements of Sizer and his work. In 1994 I got to hear him speak at the CES "Pacific Rim Conference" and was inspired by his conviction that the thinking we had engaged in, imagining what schools could be during the long days of the conference was the "easy work" and charged us with engaging in the "hard work" of school transformation. In all of my professional work I've kept that binary notion in mind, that the thinking is easy, it's the doing that's hard. So, in short, I'm a fan and it's important to understand that as a true believer and committed fan, I hold the right to both celebrate and offer critique. Though I have no way of knowing, I'd like to think that he would appreciate this.

Like so many of his books, this one has elements of autobiography. Like *The Red Pencil*, *The New American High School* reveals much about his life and how these life events impacted his scholarship and teaching. Sizer, the only son of five children, was born to his homemaker mother and art historian and Yale professor father—quintessential East Coast elite. He was ensconced in learning, thinking, and a privileged education from an early age (Sizer, 2005). Sizer also reveals that his family was divided into the "Bright Club" and the "Dumb Club" (p. 59), with him being assigned to the latter

and his mother joining it to offer some level of defense. There's evidence that Sizer struggled with dyslexia, but he successfully graduated from private schools and earned a history degree from Yale University before serving two years of active military service. It was his time in the army that Sizer credits with his fascination with pedagogy, teaching, and education. He was an artillery officer, charged with teaching young, often ill-educated enlisted men on the mathematics involved in sitting, firing, and maintaining howitzers (p. 145). After his military time ended he taught English and mathematics at the Roxbury Latin School in Boston during which time he earned a Master of Arts in Teaching from Harvard and then taught history, geography, and English at a private school in Australia. Upon his return to the States, he earned a doctorate in the history of education from Harvard, served as dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, later as the Headmaster of the elite private school at Andover, and then as professor of education at Brown University where he founded the Coalition of Essential Schools.

In the early 1980s he was asked to be the “teacher voice” for the Paidiea Group, an organization of elite university faculty charged to revitalize, reform, and reinvent education in the wake of the *A Nation at Risk* (Bullough et al, 1994) report. Shortly after, Sizer was asked to participate in National High School Evaluation that led him to study, visit, and observe in high schools and classrooms across the nation in rural, suburban, and urban contexts. Three works resulted, two developed for a scholarly audience—*The Shopping Mall High School* (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1986) and *The Last Little Citadel* (Hempel, 1987)—and *Horace's Compromise* (1984), with which Sizer was charged with transforming the complex research into a text understandable to a general audience.

Horace's Compromise (1984) details the deep problems, daily struggles, and attending compromises of educators and schools everywhere through the eyes of an invented, everyman English teacher, Horace Smith. It was the first in a series, of which two more would soon follow, *Horace's*

School (1992), then years later, *Horace's Hope* (1997). The first two texts, combined with an Annenberg Grant, led to the formation of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) at Brown University, bringing together educational luminaries such as Deborah Meier (Central Park East Schools and Mission Hill) and Dennis Littky (Thayer Community School, MET Schools, and the Big Picture Company). CES was a loose organization based on the Ten Common Principles (which started as nine), which Sizer designed to enact his vision of what education could be. At its height CES boasted schools in every state and at least one entire school district (Lexington, KY). Hard to sustain under the acceleration of the standards movement in the 1990s and 2000s, the organization struggled to stay relevant as it was pushed out of public schools, remaining largely in charter schools, private schools, and the handful of lucky public schools allowed to opt out of portions of NCLB.

Sizer's latest and quite tragically last book, *The New American High School* (2013) is an expansion, re-affirmation and further explanation of many of his germinal ideas, thought about again in our current climate and context. A reminder that a more intellectual and a more humane way is possible. Not a self-help book, not a "do these 10 things and schools will be perfect" though it has elements of these), *The New American High School* is more of a rumination, a wise man thoughtfully revisiting ideas he has advocated for decades. Readers and advocates of *Horace's Compromise* and *Horace's School* will find some similar arguments here. Like the *Horace* series, *The Students Are Watching* (2000), and his autobiographical *The Red Pencil* (2005), *The New American High School* is organized around themes. *The Problem*, *Growing Up American*, *Learning Differences*, *The Language of Schooling*, *Time, Space and Costs*, *Courses*, *Technology*, *Pedagogy*, *Choice*, *Faith*, *Morality*, and *The Prospect* are the chapter titles that serve as foci which allow Sizer to delve into issues and "grapple" with complex ideas (to borrow a chapter title from another of his works). With the exception of *The Red Pencil*, this is his most personal and autobiographical work,

sharing much about his life as a child and the major events which formed him and his views on education. He reveals his struggles with teaching, the development of his initial pedagogy, his doctoral thesis and how he became who he was. Sizer credits his wife, the secondary history teacher and university instructor Nancy, for pushing him in this direction.

Structurally, the chapters of *The New American High School* is similar to a backward planned unit made famous by an early member of CES, Grant Wiggins. Sizer opens with a series of questions, what might be thought of as essential questions, provides us with the dictionary definition of words and terms—learning, assessment, difference—and then pushes us to think differently about the language, encouraging us to push it further, to re-examine and imagine something wholly different. The push comes in the form of argument but also a relentless but gentle questioning, the encouragement of a knowledgeable grandfather not telling you what to think but giving you many things to think about. For example, in the chapter entitled *Courses* Sizer asks these questions:

- What courses should be required in the school programs of all young citizens?
- Should courses be defined on the basis of subjects, of the shape of the scholarly field?
- Or should they arise from some aspect of thinking and thereby knowledge?
- What might replace or supplement them? (p. 116)

These questions remind us that in schools some things have been made sacred and assumed. For the betterment of schools and learning we need to rewire and un-train our brains to look at schools anew. In the end of each chapter, Sizer provides a bullet pointed list of things that could be done, not endorsing any but offering them as possibilities. Not wanting to leave the reader grasping for an example, Sizer provides some, hoping the reader will develop others and apply them in their context and unique situation. He understands that one size cannot fit all and does not want to replace an unbridled hegemony with a new hegemony. He wants uniqueness and difference. It's a combination

of a lifetime of reading, visiting, questioning, researching, writing and seeing, eloquently packaged. This is the book's true gift, not a neatly packaged step by step cookbook on what all 4th graders need to know, what all schools need to have, but an acknowledgement that school transformation is hard, that the road is long, but there is an exquisite beauty in the hope and possibility of what schools can become.

As in his other works, Sizer's language in *The New American High School* is eloquent, smooth, and poetic in both description and argument. It reminds me of the New England of his upbringing—the Ivy League, the engaged upper crust. It is anachronistic in a sense but all too present in another. The language is, as Deborah Meier describes him in her forward, so different from her own in upbringing and education but so similar in sensibility, belief, and passion. The language he writes in tells that he knows much, very much, and could have written a complicated technical text prepared for a small percentage of academicians. Instead, Sizer thoughtfully works his language to bridge that all too wide chasm between research, erudition, and the interested, but less knowledgeable reader. “Most of us like the intellectual banging of one kid's mind against that of another—and against our own” (p. 58) and “Once in school, the ironfisted schedule guarantees chaos in most schools between bells” (p. 91) are but two examples of many that exemplify his eloquent use of language.

In the last paragraph of the first chapter, Sizer himself explains the importance of language and the importance of the past, both long ago and his own. He also lays out the major questions he is attempting to answer with this book, “What should a truly *new* secondary school look like? What will make it new? What from the past should remain supported and in place? I try here to answer some of these questions in an order that make my case clear and thus persuasive. My arguments depend heavily on carefully chosen words: *language drives action*. And not all *good ideas* are *new ideas* (emphasis added). We must protect the best of the past and

discard that which no longer serves our particular children well” (p. 14).

Sizer bridges other gaps as well, between research and policy, school history, autobiography, lived classroom instruction and pedagogy, and how to set up and run a school. Some we have heard before, but that which is repeated is buffed up, repainted, elegantly re-explained and strengthened with more current examples and elegant argument. In earlier works (the first two *Horace* books), Sizer argued in favor of the interdisciplinary nature of school disciplines, indicating that history and English or math and science, or art and science might be better taught together, connected by an essential question or theme. In *New American High School*, Sizer returns to his graduate study of Charles Eliot, a past president of Harvard, and his work with the Committee of Ten on Public School Studies and William Torrey Harris, past school superintendent of St. Louis, to explain why schools are segregated by subjects in terms of classes for students as well as geography in school buildings (history teachers in this area, math teachers over here, etc.). He reminds us that today’s schools are how they are based on choices made, often well meaning, with elements of good and bad sense that have consequences for how schools educate children. Bemoaning the fact that present day educators are largely unaware of these men and their choices (and James Conant, another Harvard president who deepened the discipline divide) Sizer indicates, “More’s the pity they know little about where so many of their habits came from” (p. 122). Sizer argues for more connectivity between courses and classes, not just for the benefits of fewer students and “preps” for teachers but for the grounded intellectual work in which it engages students. He pushes us to rethink and invent new subjects for the curriculum, prodding us, as all good teachers do, with a question, “Is ‘sense making’ a discipline that can be usefully crafted into a subject?” (p. 124).

Through the thematic ordering of the book, Sizer is able to push at subjects and ideas in new and quite interesting ways. To explain the growth of his pedagogy, he begins autobiographically

saying, “How I was taught depended almost entirely on the concept of *delivery*...Knowledge rolled in—it was and, too often still is, assumed—quite like a delivery truck dispensing goods that I have ordered from a catalogue” (p. 24). He indicates that as many of us, he taught, initially at least, how he was instructed, even though he knew it to be flawed. It was at Andover, where he was both Headmaster and teacher that he found the “Socratic Method—teaching by use of a string of carefully chosen questions” (p. 27) worked well. This pursuit of pedagogy is a theme carried through much of his work. He argues that “teaching—pedagogy—is an art and, thus practiced as an art, the arts of telling and listening, a process that moves back and forth...Pedagogy assumes reciprocity” (p. 155). Through the reciprocity there develops, Sizer argues, “an ever deepening dialogue, one in which a variety of answers might be acceptable even helpful” (p. 155). While there ought to be habits, dispositions that educators ought to grow in our students, (such as listening, expressing, empathy, restraint, responsible autonomy, attending to the legitimate needs of others, and wonderment (p. 128), the end result of education needs to be an intellectual freedom. Students should know content and facts of course, but there are larger skills of intellectual and academic empowerment and the discipline to use them well that should be developed through school.

Sizer makes the familiar unfamiliar and forces us to re-examine what might be deemed obvious. In his chapter designated *Time*, he does this very uniquely. Time, Sizer argues, is “pedagogical coinage” (p. 93) and it is in limited, if not short, supply. It, more than most things, determines what is taught and how it is taught. He argues that pedagogical choices, course offerings, and other “choices” made by individual teachers, students, and schools, aren’t really choices at all but rather are dictated by the clock. Schools have only so many “pedagogical ‘coins’ and must ‘spend’ them thoughtfully” (p. 142), thus physics gets a prime location in the school schedule while orchestra does not. The time that has been imposed on schools, as Sizer says, is a limited resource that

makes it difficult if not impossible “to do the job that we have accepted” (p. 95). To teach well is directly related to how time is allotted and utilized, so Sizer argues above all for flexibility. Blocks of time of varying lengths, depending on need of subjects, experience of staff, needs of students, allow for variant approaches. Using the examples of a hospital emergency room and painter’s art studio, Sizer is able to describe the “dynamic workplace” (p. 104) that schools should be rather than the staid “ordered places that they try— futilely—to be” (p. 104).

Sizer hammers and critiques the ridiculousness of the No Child Left Behind requirements on standardized testing and rigid standards. Pointing out that research has revealed again and again “from such scholars as Howard Gardner and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi” (p. 31) that it gets us the opposite of what we want in learning, teaching and schools. It is in this that the book’s greatest strength and ultimately perhaps greatest weakness is revealed. The book asks questions, makes arguments, provides guidance and example but makes no pronouncements. Though an absolute progressive text, Sizer doesn’t place his book in any particular politics. He instead attempts to appeal to the thoughtful among us, to the common sense of the time we find ourselves to appeal to leftists and conservatives and those with no particular politics to speak of. There is an undergirding hope throughout the book that there’s a reasonableness within us all that knows what schools can be and a trust that we will strive to make them so. He seems to know that we will engage in the large conversation of re-creation and transformation, trimming that which is not needed and holding firmly on to that which is. The strength is that he like so many others sees that schools need to be different but perhaps have some similarities. In a sense he’s saying schools are complicated and although this book is 231 pages, it’s a much longer conversation. The weakness of Sizer’s argument is obvious. Americans want the quick fix. We want the pills, the surgery, the plan and we don’t want it to take too much time. Sizer is too thoughtful a human being for that and too much a student of

schools to realize that not only do quick fixes not work, but also that they largely exacerbate the problems.

As to the aforementioned silences...silences might be the wrong word. He identifies the larger problems that plague schools, poverty, racism, and neglect amongst others, but Sizer -- a progressive, not a critical theorist --leaves it at that and does not directly address how the New American High School will deal with these profound issues. With all that is beautiful and profound in this text, there are gaps, things missing, and things lightly covered. In a recent column, Jay Matthews (2013) reviewed *The New American High School*, praising Sizer for being in opposition to standardized testing but not engaging in the barbarous name calling and shrill screeching that has become our national dialogue on so many things. This is absolutely true, Sizer neither points his finger in the eye nor thumbs his nose at others, but does profoundly disagree. While Sizer has made it clear in this work that he was in opposition to standardized testing by developing a network of schools and an educational philosophy that describes a multitude of other ways, some would hope that a man of Sizer's knowledge and impeccable standing might leverage a bit of his cultural capital and screech just a bit more loudly.

For example, Sizer's chapter *Testing* in which he riffs on other notions of testing, beginning with definitions of testing, evaluation, measurement, and eventually assessment. He describes types of tests from individual (driving, writing an essay), to emotional tests (Goleman, 2005), to external tests that are standardized. He engages in a discussion of how test makers and enforcers don't understand classrooms, the arrogant notion that tests are "instruments of mastery" (p. 170), and describes how much is spent on them (using Ohio as an example). He describes two teachers from Francis W. Parker Essential School and their fight to have state law makers understand controversial history questions on the Massachusetts state test (MCAS). In all of this, he critiques testing, but, I wish he had done so a bit more loudly and perhaps a bit more directly.

Something largely absent from the text is where the standards and testing increase has come from. Where Sizer was so eloquent in pointing out the historical foundations of so many other things, he stays away from the rising conservative and neo-liberal tide and with it the anti-unionism, blame the teacher historical moment in which we find ourselves in (Apple, 2006). Perhaps this is more evidence of the amiability that Matthews was speaking of in the *Washington Post* review or Sizer's attempt to reach a more broad audience. Whatever the reason, a thoughtful explanation of the larger underpinnings of our current dilemmas from him and a more broadly defined critique of this would have made for a powerful defense of the pedagogic and assessment arguments Sizer is making. The problem is that this alone—teaching well and differently—will not on its own balance the issues of race and poverty in this country and without considering them in any vision of education, without permanently including them within the grammar of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), no vision ever will. Sizer understands this but doesn't make the argument vociferously enough.

Like the photograph in Sam Chaltain's book, *The New American High School* echoes the kinetic energy, forward motion, hope and optimism of the photograph and of Sizer and his wife and intellectual partner Nancy. Though the text is beautifully written, he is not easy on us. It is because of the clarity of the writing that the full weight of what is possible and what can be falls squarely on our shoulders. This is what is, now, but what will be? Sizer did as much as he could during his long life. He asked questions, explored, listened to powerful and tiny voices alike, taught, wrote, spoke, developed an organization and then in retirement continued to teach and write. In his life, he did all that he could to make schools, teaching and learning better. May we all be lucky enough to be able to say that at the end of our lives. With *The New American High School* Ted Sizer reminds us once again that something new and different—borrowing from the old to create the new, something for our time, needs and context—is

possible and ought to be done. To engage in this work is part of the progressive tradition of schools and schooling for which he was a constant and consistent advocate. He did what he could and now the responsibility is wholly ours.

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