

The Centrality of Context: Ted Sizer and the High Flying Adventure of Common Principle Six

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The Coalition of Essential Schools' Common Principles (1984), which grew out of the findings of *A Study of High Schools* and followed the publication of *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*,¹ were intended as a rallying point for school reform and a kind of constitution for exemplary school practice as Theodore R. Sizer imagined it. In the years since, the Common Principles have had a wide and varied impact on American K-12 education—deep in some places and much less clear in others. In contexts that share Sizer's vision of democratic localism (See Michael Katz),² the Common Principles have provided guidance for the founding of new schools and the transformation of existing schools. Such schools, connected by the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES),³ have found, in the Common Principles and the CES network, a source of learning and political clout.⁴ In this arena, the Common Principles have served their intended purpose and proven remarkably resilient over many years.

At the same time, the Common Principles have entered education policy discussion, collided and combined with many other reform agendas, and re-surfaced in the world of practice in unpredictable ways. Disconnected from their animating context, the Common Principles have sometimes been reduced to instrumentalities—advisory, block scheduling, performance-based assessment—and have calcified into “models” to be “implemented” with no clear rationale. Understanding this bifurcation of Sizer's legacy (fidelity to principles in some places, instrumental adoption in others) illuminates the central role of context

in Sizer's school reform agenda and, more generally, the work of school improvement.

An exploration of the path of just one of the Common Principles illustrates this dynamic. Number Six among the Ten Common Principles is "Diploma by exhibition," also described in early CES literature as "demonstration of mastery" and "the students' demonstration that they can do important things."⁵ For two public schools in Massachusetts, this principle is alive and well. Mission Hill Elementary School in Roxbury was founded by Sizer's CES colleague Deborah Meier as a Boston Pilot School in 1995 and serves students from kindergarten through grade eight.⁶ Before graduating from the school, each student must present his or her work in six formal presentations, called exhibitions, to teachers, students, parents, and outside community members. In each exhibition, the student presents and defends work that he or she has completed in one of the school's six domains of learning: History, Literature and Writing, The Arts, Mathematics, Science and Technology, and "Beyond the Classroom" (documented learning experiences outside of school). The exhibitions are evidence-based, consisting of the student's actual work, such as essays, lab reports, and math problems, which are carefully selected and placed in a portfolio. Student work must meet demanding criteria. For example, the required evidence for Mathematics, as posted on the school's website, is as follows:

- (1) A portfolio of four problems students have solved at appropriate levels of mathematical skill, one in each of the strands: number sense, data and statistics, geometry, and patterns and functions.
- (2) Evidence of mastery of appropriate mathematical terms and facts (the "basics").
- (3) Evidence of basic competency as measured by a standardized test.⁷

Because a successful exhibition requires well developed oral presentation skills and because an acceptable portfolio requires critical thinking skills, daily classroom work folds oral expression and critical thinking into "the basics" in a seamless manner.

Another example is The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts, founded by Nancy Faust Sizer, Ted Sizer, and several colleagues⁸ in 1995 as one of the State's first Commonwealth charter schools.⁹ The Parker School serves students from grade seven through high school graduation, drawing from over 40 towns in eastern and central Massachusetts. Like Mission Hill, The Parker School relies on portfolios and exhibitions to assess student progress. Because Parker School students are older, the standards are more sophisticated. In addition to portfolio exhibitions that students must prepare at key moments in their early years at Parker (similar to Mission Hill), each student

must also develop a senior project in their final year. The senior project is supported by a year-long course called the Senior Seminar. For the senior project, the student first identifies an area of interest and then a related research question. Research into the chosen question leads not only to a written report but the development of a related product, created in collaboration with a mentor, making a relevant contribution to the community. At the end of the year, candidates for graduation must present their year-long work in an exhibition before a jury including members from both the school community and the larger community.

An example of the senior project, available on the school's website, is illustrative.¹⁰ Parker School student Tim Roper chose to study Amish culture. Like all senior projects at the Parker School, Tim's had to meet strict criteria for six tenets: an essential question, a benefit to the larger community, a multi-faceted approach, a research component, collaboration, and academic rigor.¹¹ Tim's essential question was, "How can I use an immersion experience to expand my understanding of the English influences on Amish Culture and Lifestyle?" The centerpiece of Tim's project was a trip to Hartly, Delaware, where he took up a one-month residence in an Amish community. In addition to extensive research (research and academic rigor), cultural immersion (collaboration), and the creation of a website (multi-faceted approach), Tim also produced a tangible benefit for the Amish community by working in a saw mill and on a house construction site while he was there. From this brief chronicle of Common Principle Six, as it finds expression within two school communities as Sizer envisioned, we turn next to a story of that same principle's migration beyond the CES realm.

During the early years of CES, much was learned about the principle of "diploma by exhibition" and "demonstration of mastery." CES research scholar Grant Wiggins and other CES colleagues began to apply the term "authentic" to demonstrations of mastery that grew from essential questions and required students to demonstrate sophisticated understandings, complex thinking, and judgment. A CES publication from 1989, authored by Kathleen Cushman, refers to "authentic" learning and references Wiggins' work.¹² Also in 1989, an article by Wiggins, "A True Test: Toward More Authentic and Equitable Assessment,"¹³ was published in *Phi Delta Kappan*. Others, on the edge of or outside of the CES realm, including Fred Neumann¹⁴ at The University of Wisconsin–Madison; Dennie Palmer Wolf¹⁵ at work in Pittsburgh on a Rockefeller Foundation funded assessment project; and Joan Herman¹⁶ at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) at the University of California, Los Angeles, were adopting the term and writing about the related notions of "portfolio assessment," "sampling"

of student work (Wolf), and “performance-based assessment” (Herman). These related concepts were gaining currency in the education world. A combined search for the term “performance based assessment” in four major education databases yields the following number of appearances in education journals:

1988 = 0 hits
1989 = 2
1990 = 8
1993 = 36
1998 = 43¹⁷

A similar search substituting the term “authentic assessment” yields the following:

1988 = 0
1989 = 1 (Arthur Costa)
1990 = 6
2000 = 45¹⁸

Clearly, these ideas were co-emergent within the education community in the United States, and Sizer, with his Coalition of Essential Schools, was a major player.

In the early 1990s, these ideas became central to policy formation in Massachusetts. Several popular education reform ideas, chiefly standards-based education, school choice including charter schools, and the elimination of teacher tenure cohered into an education reform bill in Massachusetts that won legislative approval in June 1993 with the promise of new state aid to localities.¹⁹ Among the ideas included in the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) of 1993 was language promising an assessment system that “shall employ a variety of assessment instruments.” It also mandated that, “As much as is practicable, especially in the case of students whose performance is difficult to assess using conventional methods, such instruments shall include consideration of work samples, projects and portfolios, and shall facilitate authentic and direct gauges of student performance.”²⁰

“Portfolios,” “performance,” and “authentic” assessment were now front-and-center in a major state level policy initiative. With passage of the bill, the Massachusetts Department of Education was handed a new, urgent, and daunting charge to create an entire assessment system for public schools across the Massachusetts Commonwealth where none existed. Not surprisingly, speed, efficiency, and cost control zoomed to the top of the Department’s priorities. Such priorities made machine readable, standardized tests a desirable option. Thus was born the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, a series of on-

demand tests in math, science, English, and history consisting mainly of multiple choice questions supplemented with narrowly proscribed “open response” items. As of this writing, 17 years after passage of the bill, a student must pass the Math and English Language Arts tests in order to graduate from High School.²¹ So what became of authentic assessment, performance assessment, portfolios, and the mandated “variety” of assessment instruments in the 1993 law? Their only appearance in Department policy since 1993 is in the MCAS Alternate assessment intended for students with severe learning disabilities. Here the terms live, but the reality of MCAS alternate assessment is far different from what Ted Sizer, Kathleen Cushman, and Grant Wiggins were advocating in the 1980s and far different from what leading CES schools were and still are practicing. The MCAS alternate assessment does indeed consist of representative samples of student work collected in what is termed a “portfolio.” However, work samples serve as evidence of discrete, largely procedural skills. In addition to student work, the MCAS Alt includes a great deal of teacher work: written descriptions and explanations, labeling, and categorizing that must be discerned from a 740-page series of downloadable PDF files. An excerpt is illustrative:

Product Description (optional) attached to each piece of primary evidence that provides required information. If labels are not used, required information must be provided on teacher-designed labels or written directly on each piece. Blank product descriptions are provided in the Product Description Labels/Blank Data Chart section of this manual.²²

Teachers report anecdotally to this author that the preparation of an MCAS Alt reflects more on a teacher’s ability to follow instructions and endure clerical tedium than on student learning. What happened here?

On their upward trajectory, several related terms travelled well and found a prominent, explicit place in statute. The ideas that gave them meaning, however, were nowhere visible, and their integrity was therefore less assured. What happened next is especially interesting. Within the many pages of MCAS regulation, testing instructions, etc. produced by the Massachusetts Department of Education there is little reference to authentic assessment, performance assessment, or portfolios, as if to acknowledge that such instruments have indeed *not* been adopted and are distinct from standardized tests, thereby implying that their meaning to some extent has actually been retained and respected by writers within the Department. This is good news and bad news for advocates of authentic assessment. What, however, of the one instance in which the terms do make their way fully back to Earth from the policy journey? In the MCAS Alt, while the terms do represent actual student

work and not a “proxy” (Sizer’s frequently invoked, compact dismissal of traditional testing), there is little resemblance in purpose and effect. Ironically, a form of assessment that was designed to provoke and evaluate complex learning, has been within a state bureaucracy, reserved for a special instance in which learning is necessarily less complex, while a form of assessment widely known for its limitations in the evaluation of complex skills—standardized testing—has become the norm.

What do we make of this astonishing journey of an idea? Following are several thoughts suggested by this small study.

1. Terms travel well; ideas, less so.²³ Terms such as “authentic assessment” spawned by CES practitioner-scholars and rooted in Sizer’s 6th Common Principle “demonstration of mastery” enjoy wide usage, but their meaning, if the example offered here is at all representative, will be reconstructed by the values of the context in which they are used.

2. The culture of an institution is shaped by the questions it asks. “What do we want our children to learn?” is a question that a community asks on behalf of its children, and the answer likely includes, not only cognitive skill but moral reason, habits of mind, qualities of character, and a certain canon of knowledge. “What are we capable of measuring?” is a question that policy makers ask in the face of angry public scrutiny (now termed “accountability”), and the answer is, “Whatever we can plot as a number on a scale.” Of course, a community or a bureaucracy is interested in more than just one question. A community will ask what can be measured, and bureaucrats will ponder what children should learn. The difference lies in which questions are primary.

3. The nature of educational assessment is determined to a large degree by the relative valuing of expert judgment and measurement. A CES school uses measurement in its evidentiary process but relies ultimately on expert judgment. A portfolio contains tests scores as well as summary grades on student work, but the assessment of the portfolio relies, in the end, on the deliberation and informed judgment of several individuals. A bureaucracy, on the other hand, seeks to minimize human judgment because it is “subjective,” and instead trusts the apparent simplicity of a single number on a scale. A score of X on the MCAS is a pass; X - 1 is a fail. This is called “scientific” and is deemed “valid and reliable.”²⁴

4. Too heavy a reliance on judgment at one extreme or measurement on the other can be problematic. Judgment, in the form of democratic localism has a troubled past. Michael Katz reminds us of this with a reference to a 19th school master who walked into an Indiana small

town looking for work and was met by one of the school trustees. The trustee said,

...ef you think you kin trust your hide in Flat Crick school-house, I ha'n't got no 'bjection... Any other trustees? Wal, yes. But as I pay the most taxes, t'others jist let me run the thing.²⁵

Local judgment, without some evidentiary check, risks becoming subject to whim, or worse, prejudice and favoritism. Sometimes laws and court decisions from higher jurisdictions such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which draw upon an evidentiary foundation (i.e. measurement), are needed. On the other hand, measurement alone is often inadequate to settle big scientific questions. Expert judgment is required, sometimes even in the form of a vote: Is climate change caused by human activity? Is Pluto a planet?²⁶

5. If we accept the principle that particular ideas are necessarily rooted in particular contexts, and if we wish to spread those ideas, then we must also, somehow, spread the context. How do you spread a context? The answer to that question is, perhaps, where Sizer, who got a lot right, got it most right of all. The Coalition of Essential Schools is a context spreading medium. As a self-governing, free flowing network of colleagues, it brings the power of an established culture to new places. It transports not just the ideas but the people, the practices, the principles, and the culture that animate them. The experience of the Coalition is a rich resource for study of the power and the limitations of networks as the means to scale up promising initiatives. Recent research in the field of professional networks suggests this is a promising direction for systemwide education improvement.²⁷

6. As educational assessment this year is taken up by vendors competing for Race to the Top dollars to create “twenty-first century” “performance-based assessments,” the story of “demonstration of mastery” as it shot from an informed context to a state bureaucracy and back to ground level can be instructive. As we consider the role of agents of the state far removed from those localities in making consequential decisions, this writer is reminded of a statement attributed to Thomas Jefferson and often quoted by Ted Sizer:

I know no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power.²⁸

Notes

¹ Theodore R.Sizer. *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1984).

² Michael B. Katz. *Reconstructing American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

³ The website of the Coalition of Essential Schools is www.essentialschools.org

⁴ Donna Muncey & Patrick McQuillan. *Reform and Resistance in Schools and Classrooms: An Ethnographic View of the Coalition of Essential Schools* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996). See also *Horace's Compromise*, "Afterword: An Experiment for Horace," pp 222-240.

⁵ *Horace's Compromise*.

⁶ The website of the Mission Hill School is www.missionhillschool.org

⁷ "Mission Hill School Graduation Requirements and Portfolio Review," p. 12, accessed October 10, 2010. www.missionhillschool.org

⁸ The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School website is www.parker.org

⁹ Information about Commonwealth Charter Schools in Massachusetts is available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/about.html>

¹⁰ "Tim Roper: Immersion with the Amish," accessed October 10, 2010, <http://www.parker.org/DivisionIII/Class%20Pages/Senior%20Project/default.htm>

¹¹ "The Senior Project," accessed, October 10, 2010, <http://www.parker.org/DivisionIII/DivisionIIIHome.htm>

¹² Kathleen Cushman. "Asking the Essential Questions: Curriculum Development," 1989. Accessed 9.30.10 <http://www.essentialschools.org/resources/122>

¹³ Grant Wiggins, "A True Test: Toward More Authentic and Equitable Assessment," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70 (1989): 9.

¹⁴ Douglas Archbald & Fred Newmann, "The Functions of Assessment and the Nature of Authentic Academic Achievement," in Harold Berlak (ed.), *Assessing Achievement: Toward the Development of a New Science of Educational Testing* (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Dennie Palmer Wolf, "Portfolio Assessment: Sampling Student Work," *Educational Leadership*, 46 (1989): 7, pp. 35-39.

¹⁶ Joan Herman, "R&D Priorities for Educational Testing and Evaluation: The Testimony of the CRESST National Faculty," Source: ERIC (Ebsco), 19890901.

¹⁷ Combined Search of Education Research Complete, Educator's Reference Complete, ERIC, and ProQuest Education Journals, University of Massachusetts Lowell Off Campus Users Login, accessed 9.30.10. www.uml.edu

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ P. J. Howe, "Massachusetts House Approves Education Reform Bill," *The Boston Globe*, City Edition, June 2, 1993, p. 24. Howe wrote numerous articles for *The Boston Globe* over a period of several years tracking the development of MERA.

²⁰ Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, Section 29, subsection 1I, p. 176.

²¹ Since the 1990s, test-based accountability has come to dominate education policy at the state and federal levels. A robust and growing body of evidence suggests that such policies have led, in many schools, to a narrowing of school

curricula to tested subjects only and an instructional focus on low cognitive demand associated with tested knowledge and skills. For analysis of the impact of test-based accountability in both Massachusetts and across the United States, see the following:

Linda Darling-Hammond. "Race, inequity, and educational accountability: The irony of No Child Left Behind," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 10 (2007): 3, pp. 245-260.

Chester Finn & Diane Ravitch, "Not by Geeks Alone," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2007, accessed 9.26.11. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118653759532491305.html>

Jonathan Kozol. *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Crown, 2005.

²² Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System Alternate Assessment for Students with Disabilities, p. 34, accessed 9.30.10, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/alt/resources.html>

²³ See Michael Fullan, *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2005). For example: "We find that the terms travel easily—professional learning communities, networks, capacity building, and so on—but the meaning of the underlying concepts does not." (p. 67).

²⁴ A related question hinges on the potentially prescriptive nature of learning outcomes per se. In the teaching of creative endeavors, learning outcomes may be emergent in the process of teaching and learning, i.e., unknown and unknowable in advance by the instructor. For an interesting analysis, see David Buss, "Secret Destinations," *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 45 (2008):3, pp. 303-308.

²⁵ Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871; reprint, New York: Hill & Wang, 1957), pp. 1-2. Cited in Katz, Michael B., *Reconstructing American Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

²⁶ See IPCC Third Assessment Report: Climate Change 2001. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, accessed 11.5.10, http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/publications_and_data_reports.htm#1; Also see Resolution 6a: Definition of Pluto Class Objects. International Astronomical Union General Assembly, August, 2006, accessed 11.5.10, http://www.iau.org/public_press/news/detail/iau0603/s

²⁷ Michael P. Fullan, "Positive Pressure" in Andy Hargreaves, Ann Lieberman, Michael Fullan, & David Hopkins, *Second International Handbook of Educational Change* (New York: Springer, 2010), pp. 119-130. Also, Karen Seashore Louis, "Better Schools Through Better Knowledge? New Understanding, New Uncertainty." In the same volume, pp. 3-28.

²⁸ Thomas Jefferson, Letter to William C. Jarvis (1820). In Lipscomb & Berg (Eds.) (1903-1904), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson Memorial Edition*, 15:278 Washington, DC. Viewed 10/4/10, <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff0350.htm>