23 The Coalition of Essential Schools

The Coalition of Essential Schools is a US organization created to further a type of whole-school reform originally envisioned by founder Ted Sizer in his book, *Horace's Compromise*. The group began in 1984 with twelve schools and grew to 600 members. Recently, it merged with another professional organization.



However, it is interesting and informative to examine the organization's initial nine principles for they echo contemporary trends and issues. Why are we still debating these topics some three decades later?

1. The school should focus on helping adolescents to learn to use their minds well. The school should make no claim to be "comprehensive;" that is, it is not to be a center offering a wide variety of social and vocational services to adolescents, at least at the expense of its central intellectual purpose.
2. The school's goals should be simple: that each student master a limited number of central important skills and areas of knowledge. While these inevitably will reflect the traditional academic disciplines, the program's design should be shaped by the intellectual and imaginative powers and competencies that students need, rather than necessarily by "subjects" as conventionally defined. That is, the school should not bind itself to the existing complex and often dysfunctional system of isolated departments, "credit hours" delivered in packages called English, social studies, science and the rest. The aphorism "less is more" and the virtue of thoroughness, rather than mere coverage of content, should guide the program.
3. The goals of the school should be universal, the same for everyone, while the means to these goals will vary as the students themselves vary. School practice should be tailor-made to meet the needs of every group or class of adolescents.
4. Teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum feasible extent. Efforts should be made toward a goal that no teacher have direct responsibility for more than eighty students. To allow for personalization, decisions about the details of the course of study, the use of students' and teachers' time, and the choice of teaching materials and specific pedagogues must be unreservedly placed in the hands of the principal and staff.
5. The governing practical metaphor of the school should be student-as-worker, rather than the more familiar teacher-as-deliverer-of-instructional-services. Accordingly, a prominent pedagogy will be coaching, to provoke students to learn how to learn, and thus to teach themselves.

6. Students entering secondary school studies at this school are those who are committed to the school's purposes and who can show competence in language, elementary mathematics and basic civics. Students graduate, receiving a diploma, when they formally exhibit their mastery of the school's program. There is, therefore, no strict age grading and no system of "credits earned" by "time spent" in class; the emphasis is, rather, on the students' demonstrating that they can do important things. Students of traditional high school age but not yet at appropriate levels of competence to enter secondary school studies will be provided intensive remedial work to assist them quickly to meet these standards. A final demonstration of mastery for graduation—an "exhibition"—should be the joint responsibility of the faculty and of higher authorities, and represents the latter's primary and proper influence over the school's program.
7. The tone of the school should explicitly and self-consciously stress values of unanxious expectation. ("I won't threaten you but I expect much of you"), of trust (until abused) and of decency (the values of fairness, generosity and tolerance). Incentives appropriate to the school's particular students and teachers should be emphasized, and parents treated as essential collaborators.
8. The principal and teachers should perceive themselves as generalists first and specialists second; staff should expect multiple obligations (teacher-counselor-manager) and a sense of commitment to the entire school.
9. Ultimate administrative and budget targets should include, in addition to total student load per teacher of eighty or fewer pupils, substantial time for collective planning by teachers, competitive salaries for staff and an ultimate per pupil cost not to exceed that at traditional schools by more than ten percent. To accomplish this, administrative plans will inevitably have to show the phased reduction or elimination of some services now provided students in traditional "comprehensive" secondary schools.