

Introduction

Theodore R.Sizer

Schools are wonderfully complicated places.

Even an orderly appearance that a visitor might observe masks the inevitable muddle arising from the incessant banging of dozens of egos, small and large, in one of our culture's most densely packed workplaces.

You took my book. No I didn't. I don't get this. Try it again. I still don't get this, and everybody else has. I am stupid. No, you are not stupid. I got it! I got it!

I will not do that. I was not yelling. He did it. Be cool, man. My teacher, he's cool. I want to be like her when I grow up. Stay away. Don't bother me. Let me read. Can I join?

This is boring, boring, boring. This is neat, let's try it again. I love taking care of Mr. Dan's snakes and rats in his class-

INTRODUCTION

room. Yuck, you can see the bulge of the rat in the snake! I am pumped to play Cleopatra. I got the part. Janey didn't. Ha ha!

Don't push me. I didn't. You did. No, I didn't.

No one asked me what I thought. No one explained that to me. No, I will not try to do it again. I can hardly wait for the game. I am going to be terrific. I dread the test. I dread that class that never seems to settle down. No one respects me. I am not stupid. Listen to me! I got it! I got it!

My kids don't get it. I need more time. That class took off in ways that I never dreamed. Now what to do with those kids? What's up with Gloria? Why is she suddenly so sullen?

That teacher won't tell me anything about Rose. I'm her mother; doesn't she understand that!

I couldn't believe that was my son's work; he's a real young man now.

In schools there are people of all ages, all on show, trying to make sense of themselves and their compatriots.

Constructive quiet is a school's stereotypic norm, the silences invaded only by the measured words of a teacher's lecture or the subdued but constructive babbling of children; but even within this mock serenity, the medley of individualities intrudes. John reacts differently than does Carlos. Susan isn't her buoyant self today. The neatly planned lesson collapses. The place may be quiet but inside the minds of many children will be a cacophony. And schools are about influencing those minds.

Capturing the best of this constructive individuality—an American ideal—while maintaining the purposeful calm that is necessary for each child's and each teacher's concentration is no easy task, and it takes somewhat dif-

ferent form day to day, even minute to minute. Schools are not machines that can be exquisitely tuned in advance and then allowed to run in a dependably consistent way. Schools are places constantly in motion, with the unexpected being expected.

Many, including the three of us, call the handling of this wonderfully complicated explosion of individualities the keeping of school. We like that gerund better than other, familiar characterizations.

A more commonly used verb is “run.” I run my school (or my classroom). I-the-Principal am its Manager. Neat and convenient though this characterization can be, it is misleading. No higher authority can wholly command or tune or oil up or operate—whatever might be synonymous with run—a place both so physically sprawled and full of all those big and little people, most of them at best crudely disciplined that fill a school. And school people cannot just walk away from this cacophony, pushing it aside, smothering those egos. Our job as teachers and principals is to understand and then to harness these budding egos, whatever crop of them might appear in our classrooms. “Run” implies more order than we believe is either necessary or proper.

Another verb is “provide.” Districts provide schools. But that word is too passive, too static for our taste. Having a school is more than just furnishing a place and staff. Carefully though we may prepare, schools are hostages to even small currents of change: a winning (or losing) soccer season, the arrival of several recent immigrants to this

country, none of whom speaks English and all of whom are terribly frightened; the serious illness of a student; a national catastrophe; a fight in the cafeteria. No school can just ignore these matters, even if it tries to do so. Everyone in a school is affected by them, whatever the precise “schedule” might require. The school changes, usually in small ways, sometimes in large ones.

And so we settle on keeping—Keeping School—as the word “keep” has a wonderful range of germane shadings. It means taking in (in the sense of watching out for). It denotes management (as in keeping house) and persistence (as in keeping at something). It implies the storing of things, sometimes to protect them (as the keep in a castle). It implies holding fast (keeping faith). It describes the provision of sustenance—in a school’s case, intellectual and moral sustenance, the gathering of adults, teachers mostly, around the task of lifting up the children.

We surely did not invent its use for education. That goes back several centuries, at least to William Shakespeare who employed it in a similar (albeit comic) context in *Twelfth Night* (Act III, Scene ii, 81). Its richness suggests active and humane qualities that we admire much more than are implied in words such as run and provide. And we believe that language profoundly shapes schools: Using the word “keep” says what we want said about our collective craft. Principals and teachers manage—indeed, shepherd—schools, usually with carefully outlined routines and schedules but (at our best) softened with the flexibility required to respond to unexpected

troubles, opportunities, or the angularities that are found among children and adults. The best of us persist at this complex work, faithful to our charge but flexible within it. We watch and listen and adapt to an immediate hour's potentialities and distractions, to the children, to their families, to our expectations, and to the expectations of the community and of the state.

We principals and teachers know, however, that our ministrations are but a slice of a student's life, and rarely a large slice. We are minority partners in the education of the young. We share each student with her parents and guardians; and as that child grows into adolescence, we increasingly share her with the media, with the peer group, with jobs, and with the street. Even if the child is with us every school day for six hours, in the course of a year we directly affect barely a fourth of her waking hours. It follows, then, that if our students are to learn well we must make as many alliances as possible with the adults who shape these other venues. None of these adults is more important than those found in the student's home. We believe that if school and family are respectful allies, all will benefit, and especially the child. To be allies, we have to communicate.

The three of us have all been teachers and principals. In that latter role especially we tried hard to make and sustain close contact with students' families. A key vehicle that Deborah has long used and that Nancy and I copied from her and others was a weekly letter home to parents, the purpose of which was to explain what was happening

INTRODUCTION

at school and why. We hoped that our writing might generate parental reactions that could lead to contacts between us on matters that we all believed were important to the school.

These brief letters reflected immediate issues, often very humble ones, sometimes grander ones, of politics and policy. As you will see, few could have been written in a prior summer and issued on the basis of a long-range schedule. Of necessity they are time- and situation-bound. They emerged from the immediate complexities of two public schools, an urban elementary school (for Deborah), an exurban public secondary school (for Nancy and me), both in Massachusetts.

Our hope in this book is to display a selection of these letters exactly as they were written in the hope that they will communicate a sense of what it is to “keep school.” We trust that the sum of these letters, and the essays and commentary we have added to them, will manifest some important values that the three of us share for our students. We also hope that many families, teachers, and principals will find them persuasive, pertinent, and provocative.

What brought the three of us together over two decades ago were convictions about schooling, learning, and children. In 1984 Deborah was the principal of a New York City elementary school and the architect of a network of like-minded schools, all progressive in design and summarized by the word “collaborative.” At a celebration on the occasion of the tenth birthday of this gathering

of New York schools, I encouraged Deborah to follow through on her dream of creating a public secondary school in East Harlem to be designed, albeit for older children, around the same ideas that had informed her and her colleagues' elementary schools.

Deborah had already started on that challenge. Supported by friends and two risk-taking superintendents, Anthony Alvarado and Carlos Medina, she, again with sturdy colleagues, designed and launched Central Park East Secondary School, a place that over the next two decades was to gather international attention. CPESS (an acronym pronounced "spess") was one of the first and most influential members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national gathering of middle and high schools committed to a common set of principles that had been distilled from research carried out by me and many colleagues over the preceding years. Behind these principles rested the belief that there was not, nor could there ever be, a single One Good Secondary School Model. The most persuasive strong high schools, we had concluded, while having some critical ideas in common, reflected the geniuses of their own settings, each school resonating the best (or worst) of its particular community of children, teachers, and families. No two such good (or bad) schools were quite alike, any more than any two wonderful (or dysfunctional) families are ever quite alike.

The common principles were uncontroversial in substance but usually difficult to put into practice. Focus was to be on the intellect, guiding the students into the habit of using their minds well in all aspects of their lives. To

MISSION HILL SCHOOL NEWS

Week of January 28, 2002

Vol. 5, No. 20

REMINDERS

- **Friday, February 1:**
Auditions for 2002 Alvin Alley Summer Camp for 5th, 6th and 7th graders after morning assembly
- **Wednesday, February 6:**
Governance Board meeting and vote on co-principal process, open to whole school community, 5:30-6:00 p.m.
- **Thursday, February 7:**
"How our kids learn math" with Hollee Freeman of Young Achievers, sponsored by Parent Council, 6-8 p.m. in school library.
- **Tuesday, February 12:**
West House family night, 5:45 p.m.
- **February 16 through 24:**
Winter school vacation.
- **Tuesday, February 26:**
East House family night, 5:45 p.m.
- **Week of March 4:**
Family conferences.
- **Week of March 18:**
4th and 5th grades to Farm School.

Mission Hill T-Shirts

Black w/ silver letters
Blue w/ silver letters
Kid sizes 10/12, 14/16
Adult sizes S to XL
\$10 each

See Maria in the Office

Deborah Meier, Principal
Brian Straughter, Assistant Principal
Maria Gaines-Harris, Office Manager

The Mission Hill School is a pilot school of the Boston Public Schools
Thomas Payzant, Superintendent

67 Alleghany Street
Roxbury, MA 02120
Main Office: 617-635-6384

LETTER FROM MISSION HILL

Four Arguments Against the Tests

Dear Families, Students, Staff, and Friends,

Two weeks ago, I wrote that the current test mania in the U.S. is doing more and more harm. I want to be very clear about the reasons I feel so strongly about standardized testing.

1. Standardized tests are being used improperly, in ways that were never intended. They were designed to measure "IQ," or "aptitude"—something fixed, to be measured once or twice in a lifetime. That idea itself is suspect. But as James Popham, a leading test expert, says, mere cosmetic changes like calling them "achievement" tests don't change what they're able to do. Robert Linn, another leader in testing, reminds us that, above all, they were never designed to be "taught to."

2. The measurement error is enormous. The same test given to the same student on a different day can yield a wildly different score. Averaged over a large population, these errors tend to balance each other out. But the tests are invalid at the individual score level.

3. The multiple-choice, right/wrong format can't capture achievement. Neither can mini-essays graded by people who must read them in a minute or less. These features of standardized tests make them fast and cheap to administer and score, but they compound their inaccuracy.

4. Standardized tests exclude most of what, in the real world (including college), defines being well-educated.

It's as if we decided that the written portion of the driver's test was all that mattered, and we spent all our energy in driver's ed raising kids' scores on that part. Then, to make sure no one thought we were going soft, we made

the questions really hard (how does fuel injection affect performance of catalytic converters?) and added open-ended writing tasks (describe what to do when your left rear tire blows out while driving at 55 miles per hour). Then, just to show you were raising standards, you counted spelling and punctuation. Fine. But such a test wouldn't actually distinguish a good from a bad driver.

Ditto for these tests. They miss everything that matters: reading with a critical mind, not getting fooled by nonsense, and knowing how to persuade.

What if we decided that the written part of the driver's test was all that mattered?

work well with others, take leadership, stick to a task, meet deadlines, be reliable in a crunch, or take initiative.

The tests are good for one thing: ranking people (and schools, and districts). And they have always done a good job of making sure the winners in the rest of life's stakes stay ahead and the losers stay behind. That's not by accident. (More on that later.)

So Mission Hill is sticking with tests of actual performance—the things that really count. We'll teach kids some of the tricks of testing, partly because they're interesting and partly because if kids take tests they should know a bit about how they work. —Deborah Meier

accomplish this, the goals of what came to be known as an Essential school had to apply to every student and had to be simple, clear, and focused. What they had to be focused on—primarily and in combination—was the classic core of traditional secondary schooling—language, history, mathematics, sciences, the arts, ideally all inte-



P.O. Box 2129
 Devens, MA 01432
 (978) 772-3293
 (978) 772-3295 fax
 www.parker.org

Theodore R. Sizer, *principal*
 Nancy Faust Sizer, *co-principal*

FOUNDING TRUSTEES
 Nancy Faust Sizer
 HARVARD UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR

Theodore R. Sizer
 PROFESSOR EMERITUS,
 BROWN UNIVERSITY,
 CHAIRMAN, COALITION
 OF ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS

Paula Evans
 AMHERST INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL
 REFORM, BROWN UNIVERSITY

Bill Johnson
 BROWN UNIVERSITY

John Donohue
 U.S. SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT,
 HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Kathleen Cushman
 AMHERST INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL
 REFORM, BROWN UNIVERSITY,
 COALITION OF ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS

Robert Moran
 UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Laura Rogers
 CLINICAL DEVELOPMENTAL INSTITUTE

John Stadler
 PRINCIPAL INVESTMENTS

FACILITY TRUSTEES
 Mary Hastings, *head teacher*
 Teri Schrader, *lead teacher*

PARENT TRUSTEES
 Jim Grier
 Richard Hewitt

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES
 Emily Knupp
 Sarah Morton

Friday Announcements

Date: January 8, 1999

Dear Families,

I couldn't get over the change in one of my grandchildren during the vacation. He ate his dinner with nary a complaint, then wasted as much dessert out of me as he could manage, and followed it up with a bowl of cereal! When he asked for another bowl, I could only stare at him. "Growth spurt," he airily explained.

His sister, who is one whole minute older, is on a different kind of growth spurt these days. It concerns the bravery with which she tackles the ski slopes. The two of them also trade off growth spurts in reading and math, in no discernible order and — sometimes — depending on their teachers. They don't expect to develop at the same rate in everything. But they started the year in fourth grade, and they will stay in fourth grade until June.

At Parker, we like to say, smugly, we do better. Each student is invited to progress at his own rate. If her work is solid and thorough, her portfolio and her habits of learning at an appropriate level, she may petition to gateway into a new division in the middle of the year. On that basis, more than one hundred students will change one, two or even three classes this month. This is a policy of the school which is taken for granted by students and has been strongly endorsed by parents in surveys and forums over the years.

There is another aspect of schoolkeeping, however, which is somewhat compromised by the policy of midyear gateways. It is subtler, harder to explain, but also very important. The classes which start off together in the beginning of the year are small communities. As they gel, and the students and their teachers begin to trust each other, learning increases. The interests, talents and behaviors of each person become part of a rich blend which, usually, grows more smooth and functional as the class marches together through a set of experiences and challenges. This learning is slower and less dramatic, but it, too, is a vital part of our craft.

Where are the patterns? Any school with at least two good ideas in it will sometimes find them to be at odds with each other. In this case, we have decided to honor individual progress over stability and community-building in our classes. We recognize, however, that some non-gateways will be affected by the alterations which we must make to their schedules. We are working to minimize the disruption in every way we can. We will also need your help as counselors, so that your children will be able not only to adjust to the changes in their classes but also to understand the ways in which both growth and collaboration fit into the context of our educational philosophy.

Nancy

grated. To the fullest possible extent, the teaching was to be personalized, each child learning and moving in his or her most effective way and progressing at his or her best speed, no faster (endangering superficiality) or slower (provoking boredom) than wise. Because every child was assumed (accurately) to have "special needs," each one had

a personal learning plan. Promotion for each child depended upon demonstration of mastery of the skills articulated in the plan rather than simply being a year older. That demonstration of intellectual habits required that the student had fully to engage at the task of his learning.

We used the phrase “student as worker, teacher as coach.” The youngsters had to engage, and we teachers had to “tell” less often and “coach” more often. This required us teachers to ascertain precisely what a standard was in an area—that is, what was acceptable written prose, say, for an early teenager—and we had to invent devices to ascertain when that standard was met; it could not be satisfied by a single performance but required the steady *habit* of such performances. We knew that we had to work collaboratively; no one of us had all the answers about each child.

Deborah’s CPESS explicitly defined its version of these intellectual habits and imbued its message into all aspects of the school:

Concern for Evidence (How do you know that?)

Viewpoint (Who said it and why?)

Cause and effect (What led to it? What else happened?)

Hypothesizing (What if? Supposing what?)

So what? (Who cares? Do we care? Do I care? Why?)

Such imperatives profoundly change the way one perceives school, from a place that “delivers content and skills” to a place that “engenders the habits of the informed use of knowledge.” The shift in emphasis is not just rhetorical; it has substantial implications for practice.

It also affects how school proceeds. If the children are to be known well, each teacher must have no more of them than he or she can “know well”—a number that I originally pegged for secondary schools at no more than eighty but today believe is no more than fifty—and that remain with that teacher for a substantial period of time. Specific mechanisms make this possible in many different settings: block scheduling; multiple grade levels in a classroom in the lower grades; teachers teaching more than one subject, like math and science, together. There must be time for my colleagues and me to discuss how each child is progressing and for a school culture that secures the collegiality necessary for frank, principled, and constructive dialogue. In practice, then, this requires a simply designed school, one not ruled by minutes and bells but flexibly driven by the demands of learning a few essentially important matters enduringly well. It requires graduation to be on the basis of a public Exhibition, the expression by a student that she not only has “covered” important areas of knowledge but can deploy them accurately even when confronted by unfamiliar questions from strangers. Such a skill is, of course, the “real world” for which we are preparing our students. You will see these topics discussed in the letters and essays that follow.

To accomplish this, the scale of the school (or autonomous unit within a big school building) had to be small. Principals and teachers had to be generalists as well as specialists. The subtlest requirements of the Coalition’s principles were the most difficult: “The tone of the school should explicitly and self-consciously stress values of un-

INTRODUCTION

anxious 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)."

While Deborah was launching CPESS and I was superintending and studying the spread of Essential school ideas while teaching at Brown University, Nancy was well into her second decade of high-school teaching at the Wheeler School in Providence. She had started her career at a city public school in Cambridge (then called Cambridge High and Latin School), thence to a small public high school, the Bromfield School, in Harvard, Massachusetts, and thence to Phillips Academy, where I was for nine years headmaster and history teacher. Each of these schools was, more or less, in its own way, provocative and effective. In all, the twenty-five years of practice in varied settings deeply attuned Nancy to what made sense, what didn't, and what might explain the difference. In 1996, Nancy and I retired from our work in Providence and moved back to the small town in central Massachusetts, which had always been our emotional home. Old friends of ours who were neighbors—two of whom were experienced with Essential schools work—and who had children at the threshold of middle school were eager to start a public charter school as newly authorized under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. They asked Nancy and me to join them, giving our group what Deborah had experienced in New York: a chance to design from scratch a "grade 7–12" secondary school shaped by Essential school principles. This nascent board of trustees won a charter and in 1994 opened the doors of the Fran-

cis W. Parker Charter Essential School. The school was housed in a windowless building (“2602”) on what had since 1917 been called Fort Devens; the base had recently been abandoned by the United States Army. Like most utterly new and underfinanced ventures, the school got off to a bumpy start. To lend our hands at steadying it, Nancy and I, already trustees, agreed to serve for as acting co-principals for the 1998–99 academic year, during which time the state inspectors would recommend on the school’s continuation or closure.

In 1996, on the invitation of Thomas Payzant, Boston Public Schools superintendent, Deborah was lured away from New York to start a new, small elementary school. The Coalition of Essential Schools had by that time created a set of principles appropriate to elementary education, close kin to the earlier list. Deborah’s new school was to be an Essential school as well as a “Pilot” school (as designated within the city’s contract with the Boston Teachers Union) and thus prepared to break, where necessary, new ground. Mission Hill School opened its doors in September, 1997.

Deborah’s letters that follow draw on her several years at Mission Hill. Nancy’s and mine draw only from the 1998–99 academic year when we served as Parker acting co-principals. As is apparent, these two small public schools, however different in venue and in student ages served, are both Essential schools and thereby share a substantial and fundamental core of ideas and commitments.

Rereading these letters a few years later, we are drawn

to their specificity and to how much we cared when we wrote them. They illustrate the wide variety of issues that come up in new idea-driven, community-influenced schools. The letters concern democracy and behavior, culture and individualism, assessment and progress, daily practice and state policy. They are expressions of the delight we took and take in being in these child-filled places, of our pride in the atmosphere of caring that each school has managed to create, and of our determination to overcome the obstacles that are still in our way. They reflect the commitment to democracy that guides both of our schools as places of collective responsibility (from the eldest to the youngest) and shared decision making (teachers, students, parents, concerned neighbors), places that both listened and heard, that explained what and why they believed and did, that recognized and respected difference, and that encouraged civil discussion of matters, however sometimes painful, that affected us all.

Each week as we wrote these letters we were constantly reminded of the important collaboration that needs to exist among the teachers and parents who are trying to help children to achieve honorable adulthood. Further, these letters bear witness to the idea of school as a cultural and intellectual community that can serve as a sturdy, exemplary foundation for children—and, along the way, for us, their parents, and their teachers.

It is practice that engenders the deepest form of philosophy, or so we (and John Dewey, among others) have long argued. In publishing these letters, we want to pur-

sue the idea of keeping school, reflecting again upon these richly complicated places.

We ask ourselves: What areas of our school's mission need to be tackled and articulated, again and again? How do we explain our school's mores to new parents as well as those who have been involved with the school for years? When should confusion—ours, particularly—be admitted? When does one have to be grandmotherly or grandfatherly, experienced, an expert, telling It how we believe It is? What information is necessary for parents to have? What might unduly worry or inappropriately embarrass them? How do the schools' leaders, who insist that each person in the community deserves respect, persuade each of its members to act on that principle—this without becoming dictatorial herself or himself? How do we represent public education's "outside" world to our constituency? Is there an implied hierarchy in any group that includes both adults and children, and where might the restraints on older and younger be? And so much more.

That the essays that follow were once letters provides authenticity, large thoughts behind small acts in the daily keeping of school. By reissuing them just as they were written we hope to attract a new, larger group of readers than just "our" families, ones who might thereby be reminded that the often strained but never dull raising and learning up of children and adolescents is a task best tackled together by families and teachers that understand, respect, and collaborate with each other.