

Circa 1965.
As Dean of
the Harvard
Graduate School
of Education.



Circa 1995.
In Birmingham,
England, visiting
schools while
on Coalition of
Essential Schools
business.

Circa 2002.
With his
granddaughter
Nancy.



Theodore R.Sizer



Lessons Learned

Theodore R. Sizer was born and raised in the town of Bethany, CT. He attended Pomfret School in eastern Connecticut and graduated from Yale College in 1953. He served on active duty in Germany in the Ninth Infantry Division of the U.S. Army. Upon returning to the United States, he taught at the Roxbury Latin School in Boston, followed by a year as a Master at the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School in Australia.

Upon his return from Australia, he enrolled at Harvard University, earning an M.A. in Teaching followed by a Ph.D. in American History and Education. Ted worked at the Harvard Graduate School of Education from 1956 to 1972 and served as its Dean from 1964 through 1972. He then returned to school teaching as an instructor in History and Headmaster at Phillips Academy in Andover, MA.

In 1981, he returned to research to lead “A Study of High Schools,” a national inquiry into American secondary education. In 1984, he moved to Brown University as Professor of Education and founded the Coalition of Essential Schools, now a nationwide association of more than 1,000 reform-minded schools. In 1997, he retired from Brown as University Professor Emeritus. Sizer has written several books on American secondary education, the best known being the Horace trilogy: *Horace’s Compromise*, *Horace’s School*, and *Horace’s Hope*. In 1998–99, he and his wife Nancy served as the acting co-principals of the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, MA. They also taught a course on secondary school design at Harvard University from 1997 to 2006. In 1999, the Sizers authored *The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract*. In 2004, Nancy, Ted, and Deborah Meier issued *Keeping School: Letters to Parents*, which emerged from the Sizers’ work at Parker and Meier’s work at the Central Park East Secondary School in New York.

Ted taught for 3 years at Brandeis University, and he and Nancy took part in the Spencer Seminary there for several years. They have four children and ten grandchildren and reside in the small town of Harvard, MA.



To give “lessons” that I have learned to the “next generation” is, alas, an act of arrogance. Who am I to lecture the young? Nonetheless, it is one that is appealing to an elder, a retired educator. My advice might serve as an explanation of what I did as a school person in the past, but that is the stuff of history. Times change, and with that change the ways and means of living, teaching, and learning alter. Still, if youth wants to read modern history, my story might help.

In contrast with my teenaged years, today’s secondary school students are bombarded by the media, almost all of which is produced by for-profit companies—a great 21st-century bazaar. “If it sells, it must be good” is the rule of thumb today. In the 1930s and 1940s, when I was growing up, we had the radio and the newspaper. Today’s young have Palm Pilots, cell phones, and all sorts of recording and listening devices. These not-so-youngsters connect with one another at all times during the day and, to the sorrow of parents, at night. They also connect with the offerings of the modern media continually. These all-too-unwary adolescents are a large and soft market. It’s a new, fascinating, and troubling world.

All that said, what follows is my story, my professional *cursus honorum*. (Of course, few kids today study Latin. However, some may figure out what that *cursus* and *honorum* might mean and have a chuckle about how an old fuddy duddy spent his working years.)

My Early Career in the Military

Some careers start when one is very young. Mine certainly did. I was lucky with the family I was born into. I was my parents’ sixth child, their youngest and the only boy. My father was a Professor of the History of Art and Director of the Art Gallery at Yale University. He was a busy man, and he was fortunate that my mother skillfully ruled our house in the (then) rural town of Bethany, some dozen miles north of New Haven, Connecticut.

At the advent of World War II—on December 8th, 1941, the day after the Day of Infamy, as President Roosevelt called it—my father re-enlisted in the Army. He had served briefly during the World War I but had never been sent overseas. The Army now placed him in the Arts and Monuments

section of military government. They briefly trained him at the University of Virginia and then sent him straightaway to Morocco and thence to Tunisia. There, he started negotiations with his German and Italian counterparts (usually in the no-man's land between the two armies) to determine how both the Allied and Axis armies could steer clear of early arts monuments in that theater, a remarkable instance of restraint between warring factions.

The Allies soon carried the battle north to Sicily and then into mainland Italy. Meetings of the arts representatives continued between the battle lines (literally), and these were often livened up with a bottle of Chianti wine shared by the (supposed) enemies. The negotiators' most regretted failure was the destruction of the great, ancient library at Monte Cassino; their greatest success was the protection of Rome (by pre-agreement, the armies simply went around that ancient capitol city).

Dad was then sent north to England, but while in preparation for the cross-Channel invasion, he suffered a stroke. He was sent home to a Veterans Administration hospital and thence back to our house in Bethany. He "worked" during his disability by hooking rugs, a skill which he chose because it addressed his infirmity—semi-paralyzed hands that often painfully tingled and became stone cold—and thereby speeded his recovery. His rugs, some 200 over the years, were always designed to be given as presents to important friends and family members, and they are stunning pieces of art. In due course, he completely regained his health and returned to his Yale classroom. I, as an undergraduate at Yale, audited his lectures and traveled with him and a group of his students to New York, where he marched us around the great treasures of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, lecturing as he strode.

In the martial tradition of my family, I enrolled in Yale's Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program and spent one summer in full-time training at Fort Sill in Oklahoma. This was followed by my assignment to the Ninth Infantry Division in Germany. I served in one of its artillery battalions barracked in Schwäbisch Gmünd and, later, at a Non-Commissioned Officers' (NCO) Training School in Schwabach, a small town near Nürnberg. I learned much about teaching from these assignments. My "students" were mostly in their late teens and male, high-school graduates or dropouts. Still, having a sergeant stationed in the back of the classroom meant that I didn't need to worry much about classroom management.

I engaged the family military tradition further while teaching at the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School in Australia. There, in my American uniform and with the blessing of my U.S. Army Australian Command, I served in that old school's Cadet Corps. I "commanded" a company of students and took them for spring vacation to Puckapunyal, the Australian army's equivalent of our Fort Benning. Even as late as 1958, the Aussies were still afraid of a resurgent Japan, and, in time, a newly focused and powerful China. (Vietnam was not yet on their diplomatic screen.) Back home, I continued active Reserve duty with a unit based at Fort Devens. In time, I resigned in disgust: This "Reservist" show was a wasteful game, fun for pay.

Lesson Learned? As a citizen in a democracy, one has to pull his or her appropriate weight. At the least, this means voting in all elections; taking some part in local government; speaking out when speech is necessary; and exercising restraint in word and action, which is one of the key requirements of collective, civilized government (including with regards to decisions about whether or not to go to war, a lesson our current generation of national leaders appears to have forgotten).

The essence of restraint is humility, the acceptance of the fact that no one among us has all the answers. Service in the military is just a small piece of this—or a large part, if your unit is called to fight in Iraq. Loyalty, duty, restraint, honest criticism—*humility*—when such criticism is due: These are worthy virtues.

A citizen today, with America being unnecessarily entangled in politics in Iraq, surely wishes that (among other things) his or her national government would exhibit at least some measure of humility. Some politicians appear to believe that if *they* say it, it must be correct. Only rarely is there an "on the other hand" attitude expressed; indeed, its very expression is all too often considered a sort of treason.

Anne-Liese Wellershaus and World War II

As a young child I saw another, more painful side of duty. During the 1930s, when my parents dragged their five daughters (I had yet to arrive), on a

trip to Europe to visit art galleries, they engaged a young German woman, Anne-Liese Wellershaus, to accompany them as an *au pair*. She continued this work in Bethany when I was born but went back to Germany when I started school. It was soon apparent that this young woman was a committed anti-Nazi, and when the Fascist machine started rolling in 1940, my parents offered her asylum and a room in our family home in Connecticut. They arranged a job for her as an aide in the kindergarten and 1st-grade classes at the Foote School, a progressive K–8 elementary school in New Haven that my mother had helped launch and which was led, ironically, by an English refugee from the Nazi bombings of England. “Anni,” as we kids called her, also started an egg business, with her chickens scratching around our barnyard. My youngest sister, Alice, and I quickly attached ourselves to her. We helped her prepare her “reports” to the parents of her Foote School students, as her written English was not strong. Only later did we recognize that, in the substantive sense, we had “two mothers.”

After World War II, in 1970, she was lured back to Germany by an offer of marriage from a man who had, to put it bluntly, jilted her in the 1930s. Werner Vowinckel had been a German soldier in the war and kept a large portrait of Hitler behind the shower curtain in their apartment. It was there that my wife and I discovered it when we visited the Vowinckels soon after their marriage. We have wondered often about what Anni thought about the picture, but it was a subject that we never dared to broach with her.

Lesson Learned? People can and do live with contradictory values—for instance, marriage vows versus commitments to freedom and democracy—and this may not at all be a display of two-facedness. Rather, it is a stark expression of what life often thrusts upon us.

My Graduate School Years

I arrived in 1957 at the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, initially as a candidate for the Master of Arts in Teaching program and later as a Ph.D. candidate in History and Education. I learned a batch of lessons there—which is, of course, one of the main reasons one goes into

post-baccalaureate schooling. As a condition of my admission, I was required to take a fistful of History and Social Sciences courses to make up for my “deficiency” of having majored in English. (History Departments, at least the one at Harvard, usually took a dim view of studies taken beyond their immediate purview.) My advisor, Bernard Bailyn, urged me to concentrate on late 19th-century America, drawing on the university’s strong manuscript collection from that period. I soon found myself below ground level in the university archives, delving into the Charles William Eliot papers. Eliot was, especially for his time, a national figure. Fortunately, he (or his secretary) also was a pack rat. He served as Chairman of the so-called Committee of Ten of the National Educational Association (now known as the National Education Association).

The Committee of Ten settled on what its members called the “main line subjects” of English, mathematics, history and the social sciences, science (Chemistry, Physics, Biology), and the arts. Eliot committed himself to selling the Committee’s recommendations, and he traveled widely (no mean feat back in his day; all that travel was by way of unreliable rail). Astonishingly, the effort worked. Today’s schools, over a century later, reflect these “core” subjects. Their significance is accepted as a matter of course, almost as if they were a truth delivered from on high, and is rarely challenged. (Eliot would have liked that “on high” bit.)

Lesson Learned? One of America’s most important and richest historical traditions is the demanding curricular core of middle and high school courses represented by English, the arts, mathematics, history/social studies, science, and the several vocational subjects. I had been confronted with these disciplines in my schooling career at Foote School and Pomfret School—both self-proclaimed “progressive” schools that believed themselves to be on the cutting edge but that were, in fact, unthinking copiers of the 1890s.

The late 19th-century Committee of Ten classification of “core subjects” has today an almost totally unchallenged grip on the profession’s—and the public’s—thinking about what high school should be about. Since the Committee issued its report, there have been a swarm of well-meaning scholarly and professional groups built around these subjects to support the in-school labors of teachers. Also, our state and federal programs and

laws reflect the perceived “sanctity” of these categories and are so deeply entrenched in this line of thinking that few—even among education scholars, who might be expected to be more reserved and analytic in their judgments—contemplate any change. Indeed, to do so would provoke a barrage of criticism and the skepticism of faculty committees that oversee promotion and tenure. Our professional blindness is an embarrassment.

My Deanship at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

Between 1964 and 1972, as Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I was both helped and challenged by the outside world. I was helped by the attention that was being given to education, especially with regard to educating a wider spectrum of children than had been recognized in the Sputnik era. This coincided with my own feeling that Schools of Education should take part in furthering social justice through the reforms and improvements which seemed possible in the early Johnson years. The passage of generous laws, especially the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, signified Congress’s commitment to the nation’s poorest and least advantaged children.

With the help of those laws, Harvard’s School of Education was able to hire people of broad clinical and scholarly experience in cities. Our recruiting for students of color grew more effective, especially when we sent our students out on the road with the admissions officers and when there were federal scholarships available to people who had broad experience in and commitment to the field of education, but who could benefit from more years of study.

The challenge came when the bitterness of the late 1960s began to undermine the feeling that Whites could contribute to the schooling of poor Blacks. Richard Nixon’s presidency further weakened the support that the nation was prepared to give. A sudden retrenchment in funds hit all universities hard, especially those that were working on large and carefully-constructed research projects in cities.

Student unrest, much of which arose from resistance to the draft and to the conduct of the Vietnam War, also slowed down our urban agenda

somewhat. The situation grew confusing, and then hostile, at least in some quarters. There are no heroes from the late 1960s, at least in academia. My most vigilant efforts were just to keep the boat steady, not to sail it fast or in exactly the right direction.

Lessons Learned? The sense that education—and more schooling—was the most likely vehicle to address the nation’s pockets of poverty and racism.

I learned much about persistence from the willingness of many young adults to work hard for as long as it took them to receive a master’s or doctorate degree without fear of mockery. (“What’s that old guy doing in my graduate school classes?”)

Also, I came to understand that even stuffy old universities can change, if they have stable and effective leadership (as was the case in my Harvard years, when the stubborn and principled Nathan Marsh Pusey was its president). Indeed, universities should “change” as the shape and substance of the scholarly disciplines change. Stubborn universities have no place in academic life.

Phillips Academy

Between 1972 and 1981, I was the Headmaster of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Although the setting was much more bucolic and traditional than the wide reach of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, these were years of living among teenagers—my own children included—and in, by American standards, an ancient institution. It has survived and thrived because it shifted with the times, its leaders sorting out which “changes” led into cul-de-sacs and which were timely and substantively defensible.

I was drawn to the school partly by its Charter, a remarkably eloquent document that I had studied as a graduate student. In 1778, in the midst of the American Revolution, Phillips’s founders had vowed to provide a school for “youth from every quarter,” the rich and the poor, the pious or the religiously unconvinced. Now, in 1972, the trustees were ready to include girls under the title of “youth,” a decision that enraged

some senior faculty and alumni. Most of the rest of the faculty agreed with the decision of the trustees, and I was asked to get it done.

We were fortunate that Abbot Academy—a school for girls that was founded just 50 years later than Phillips and by members of the same extended family—was contiguous. The two schools had increased their academic and social contacts in previous years. Some of the Abbot trustees and alumni were as stubbornly protective of its character as a school for females as some of the Phillips folk were about their “all male” school. Nonetheless, the fact could not be hidden that the differences in their endowments were substantial. Phillips was rich, and Abbot was poor.

The easy part turned out to be the initial negotiations, which were realistic and polite. More challenging was the merger of two proud institutions of somewhat different character and practices. This sort of log jam was familiar to many in academic life. As my father had inscribed on one of the rugs he hooked, “Marriage makes two one, but which one?”

Our answer had to be “both,” not an easy answer in those tense, black-or-white times. However, over the years it became clear that we were creating a new Andover, one whose characteristics, practices, and people came from both the old school and from the newcomers whom we welcomed into our work.

Access to Andover didn’t end with girls and women, however. We began to work on recruiting students from all income levels and racial and religious groups throughout the nation and the world. Our goal was a school that was vibrant and interesting because of its diversity. Our extensive scholarship programs helped us to begin the long climb to recruiting on a “needs-blind” basis. *Youth from every Quarter* indeed. At the same time, I learned much from my veteran colleague teachers about how to adapt serious work so that it “fits” each student without losing its intent and rigor.

Lessons Learned? Even a (frankly) stuffy, 200-year-old school can reshape itself with concerted trustee and faculty action. Entrenched tradition should not be a barrier to reform, whether in private or public sectors. A sensible merger of two institutions can be more than the mere gathering of its two parts.

Also, students can be promoted on the basis of their demonstrated performance, which limits the humiliation of those students who take longer than 4 years to complete their studies.

Furthermore, in such a school, there is room for students from abroad—Europe, Asia, Africa—on a respected basis, even though their customs, diets, and religions vary.

Moreover, such an old, fiercely partisan, religious school (adhering to the starchiest form of Calvinism in its founding years) can accommodate students and faculty members of all faiths and provide common worship services involving different traditions.

Finally, that adolescents are ready and willing—and often proud—to do the scut work of every such institution, such as dishwashing, snow shoveling, floor sweeping and scrubbing, and more, under the close direction of staff members who themselves come from varied “quarters,” some of whom may not speak much English.

Horace’s Compromise and the Coalition of Essential Schools

By the early 1980s, I found that my biggest questions—questions begging confrontation—no longer concerned Andover. Instead, they involved the malaise I sensed in other high schools in the United States. With three children still in college and one in graduate school, I took the big plunge into research. As one of my mentors scolded, I “took a big lead off first without knowing where second was.” Today, we would probably call it a midlife crisis.

No matter; it worked out. With help from some generous foundations, I was able to finance a reasonably large study over 4 years. It had three distinct but overlapping parts: my own years of travel, research, and writing, which became the foundation for my book *Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (1985); a deeper study of 12 high schools in different parts of the country, which was published in *The Shopping Mall High School* by Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen (1986); and a history of high schools in the United States since 1945 written by Robert Hampel and titled *The Last Little Citadel* (1986).

The story we told was a disappointing one for us all, full of challenges for educators and citizens. However the new ways of doing research, which involved our sharing of fieldnotes and drafts, and the resulting discussions that came from our collaboration were heady indeed. Each book was influenced by the others in the group, and much of my work since that time has been based on the insights I gained during those years.

By the end of those “full-time research” years, I prepared to take up my post as a professor and chairman of the Department of Education at Brown. I pondered what I thought we had learned. Happily, I now had the vigorous support of Brown University’s then-President, Howard Swearer. Moreover, the foundations that had funded our studies of what we were convinced were serious flaws in the design and functioning of high schools now expected us to make a serious effort to improve them. From that came the Coalition of Essential Schools, along with the financing to launch it.

The name we chose is instructive.

A “Coalition” was necessary, as we were convinced that each admirable high school had its own characteristics and its own integrity and should not be dependent on others for the specifics of its design. It would be responsive most of all to its own people, in its own community, to design the kinds of curricula and assessments most likely to lead to success.

It was “Essential” because we believed that schools had to strip down their offerings to concentrate on the content and skills that were the most crucial in helping children to learn to use their minds well.

All other benefits of schooling—and there are many—would need to be secondary to that primary goal. Our commitment to “schools” was deliberate as we believed that they were the most effective and appropriate way to reach children.

Nonetheless we asked ourselves: Did a collection of autonomous schools really need some kind of “Coalition,” after all? Couldn’t they flourish in isolation, without pressure to make them adapt to the character of other places?

To address this issue, I decided to try and give our movement more shape in the form of a set of “Common Principles” that reflected the kinds of changes we sought to make. These axioms had to do with knowing children well, promoting them on the basis of their performance, and

valuing depth over breadth in learning. While they were largely general in nature, they had to be taken seriously; each would require difficult, specific practices that reflected their commitments. That done, I set about searching for school colleagues who could help me to flesh the Common Principles out. I hoped to find perhaps a dozen of such colleagues in varied schools.

Helped again by foundations, the number of participating schools grew, and as each new school was added to our group, there was new excitement—and new challenges. Unlike any job I had ever had before, we were on completely new ground. And like other “start-ups” with which I have been involved since—especially the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts—there was something to learn and decisions to be made every day.

The task fundamentally depended on gathering people who wished to work within one reform framework. Brave pioneers among the earliest principals in the group, such as Deborah Meier and Dennis Littky, are still colleagues and soulmates of mine decades later. Other fine people came and, for one reason or another (usually retirement and the hiring of district superintendents who wanted their own “signature” reforms), left. Nonetheless, our Education Department at Brown was full of experience, talent, energy, and good will.

Institutional policy questions abounded:

- How big did we want to be? When does scale make a reform effort stagnant and rigid?
- Should a school pay to join us, or should we pay it? Who was getting the benefit? (We decide we are all benefiting and chose to leave money out of the process.)
- In what ways could we learn from these schools? How could we at Brown help them? How could we document their successes in a form that was helpful to other schools?
- If a school changed, should it stay in the Coalition? How could we honor their autonomy and at the same time create a productive community?
- In what ways should we allow our donors help us to evolve our practice? Should money drive our priorities?

What we learned was that these were sensible, indeed, crucially important, questions.

As the Coalition deepened its roots and stabilized its work, another question—again driven by money—was posed: Could we, and others, learn from an alliance of kindred groups that shared our general ends but that used different means? What sort of alliance was practically possible if our associated schools depended on the scores from standardized tests to signify their performance?

Over time, we differed with some other national school reform efforts, such as ones which, in our view, focused disproportionately on testing. We worked successfully, however, with Harvard Professor Howard Gardner's "Project Zero" enterprise, which dealt primarily with arts education; Dr. James Comer's Yale-based School Development Project; and the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts, led by Janet Whitla, which had a wide portfolio of school reform enterprises under way. Together we brought our ideas together in the so-called ATLAS Communities Project and took them to communities as diverse as Norfolk, Virginia, and Southern Maine. We grew more interested in national educational policy, feeling that we could help the teachers in our schools more if we influenced both the media and the politicians who were determining the environment in which they worked.

After I retired, the Coalition's national office moved out of a university and to Oakland, California, where it faces some of the same challenges it struggled with when I was involved as well as some new ones. The Coalition is made up of regions, which better allow teachers to get together often to share what have proven to be good ideas—at least in one school. More schools are "mentoring" other schools in more formal ways. And the annual gathering of the faithful, the Fall Forum, is still one of the highlights of my year. It's not just that I see old friends; when I'm at the Forum, I learn so much about what I still want to know.

Lessons Learned? First, that an idea, or *ideas*, can drive reform and the practice that reflects that reform. One does not need specific "practices" that are to be learned and "put into place" (in unlovely contemporary jargon).

Second, that there is both joy and challenge in this sort of effort to knock off some of the professional barnacles that all of us professionals

inevitably get. (“This is what we do. We must do it. If we do not do it, we will jeopardize our jobs and may tangle with our union contract.”)

Third, that there can never be a permanent “pure” design of a school (or school system). All must be in movement, gathering the best of emerging experience and new research findings.

Fourth, that strong organizations can ally with other such enterprises sharing common commitments.

The Annenberg Challenge

In 1993, the awe of the Annenberg Challenge, which Brown’s President Vartan Gregorian (Greg) and I discovered, was only a glint in Walter Annenberg’s eye. At a meeting at the Annenberg home in St David’s, Pennsylvania, Walter made a boldly generous financial suggestion. His wife gently urged him to increase it—substantially. Greg and I blinked and just sat there, working to keep poker faces. In but a moment, Walter suggested a major figure, one which would allow Brown to create a free-standing academic Institute to work with worthy nonprofit, grant-making institutions in getting the best total return on their initial investment. The ultimate figure was in several multiples of millions. After lunch, Greg and I returned from St. David’s to the Philadelphia airport, each ordered a beer and a sandwich, and two bunches of flowers for our wives, who had been forced to live with our “Annenberg” fantasies for so many distracting weeks.

Then came the hard part: What were we going to do with all that money? How could we develop a plan that would be focused on the children who needed it most—at the insistence of the Ambassador—and that would be progressive in its pedagogy and assessment, sensitive to the context of the cities and the schools it worked with, and yet that would be coherent and would ensure that the impact of the grant would be understood as a mission—more than just the chance to get money?

This required reconnecting with every trusted personal contact I had made in my years of working to build the Coalition. We needed allies, not competitors, yet it couldn’t be considered to be “Ted’s money.” The announcement would be made at the White House, but this was to

be kept secret. Our plan had to be impressive enough to survive grilling by the White House press corps on that day.

We decided to give the grant to several large cities, and we picked a few which would be able to use the money well. The night before the announcement was to be made, I learned that the Ambassador wanted there to be matching grants in each of the cities that received Annenberg dollars. I could understand his reasoning: Walter wanted whole communities to “get on the bandwagon” of improving schools for their most needy children. In raising money for matching grants, cities would not only spend more than only Annenberg funds on a worthy project but would have to engage the talents and passions of a wide variety of people. Yet I worried—and rightly so—that the richer, more organized cities would have an advantage over the others, and that they would present plans which, however sensible, might not be imaginative enough to overcome the tremendous odds we faced.

Lesson Learned: Lightning can always strike.

The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School

The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act provided incentives for groups of citizens and educators to design and launch new public high schools, and a group of parents and retired educators (including ourselves) gathered on what had been the Fort Devens Army Base (at which, appropriately perhaps, I had served some years before when I was in the Army’s Active Reserve) to design a new school. We came up with a design, the state approved it, and we opened our doors in an almost windowless army building designed for use by Army Intelligence units. (In fact, we found a map of East Germany pasted to a wall in the tomb-like basement level of the structure. We felt that we were helping the nation to recover from the Cold War and re-energize its children’s education, all at the same time!)

We called our fledgling institution the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School. Now housed in a more suitable structure, the old Devens Elementary School, Parker serves students in grades 7–12 with a sharply

defined curriculum that is in play all 6 years consisting of mathematics/science, arts/humanities, Spanish (the primary second language in our region of Massachusetts), and health (a strict state requirement). Students are “admitted” almost exclusively at the 7th-grade level on a blind lottery basis. (Actually the lottery takes families into consideration. If one member of a family gains admission through the lottery, his or her siblings are automatically admitted if they choose to apply.) Special needs students, save those with severe or unusual problems that are best addressed at a special school, are included in the applicant pool.

Most of Parker’s students outperform what is expected of them. That is, their exhibited work, on the basis of faculty analysis and that of the state and visitors, exceeds what the state demands. This achievement is, of course, not perfect, and Parker has its share of distracted or lazy students. What is different for them, however, is that their distraction and laziness is known well by their advisors and most of the teachers. It is hard to hide at Parker.

As the reputation of the school has grown, we have created a “Teacher Center,” now with its own building and program. It offers a variety of programs for visitors depending on their particular interests, and is the base for new programs that have emerged in our region, such as the New Teachers Collaborative (NTC). NTC participants hold jobs at schools in our region, and they come together at the Teacher Center for seminars and the opportunity to talk, a kind of “swap shop” for beginners.

While the NTC largely enrolls young persons right out of college or graduate school, it also includes older “career changers.” The mix of young and old gives special spice to the seminars, most of which are based on a commonly read text. NTC students attend the CES Fall Forums, where they can learn from the experience of collaborative professional development.

Lessons Learned? That the concerted work of passionate and intelligent people can do much to add to the bare bones of a set of common principles. Parker’s rubrics, advisories, projects, essential questions, and gateways reflect serious and joyous educational practice.

That creativity is extremely hard work, even when one’s colleagues are like-minded in most respects, but that it is definitely worth it!

That teachers learn much by sharing their practice with people from other schools.

The Twin Cities Collaborative

In recent years, as a retired gentleman I have shown greater interest in my place as a citizen of central Massachusetts. The Twin Cities Collaborative (a not-for-profit entity based at Fitchburg State College in the politically and financially little-served small, industrial cities of Fitchburg and Leominster in central Massachusetts) came together in an effort to obtain grants that would give these towns' school systems long- and well-deserved prominence. At first, the districts' superintendents quickly planned to devote their efforts to matters of traditional interest, scattering the requested funds into political invisibility. This was a disappointment; but a new iteration of our collaboration was laid out, some earlier work in professional development was expanded, and we seem to be learning from our past experience.

The Fitchburg Art Museum, a small institution that owns a remarkable collection of paintings and prints, is creating, with the strong approval of the public school system's leaders, a small school-within-the-museum which allows students to connect the visual with the full range of subjects in their school curriculum. The "holding power" of this program—no dropouts—is unique in a district that is trying to cope with a flood of non-English speakers from South America.

Lesson Learned: Serious school reform takes time, and institutions such as schools do not stand still. If you want to help them, you have to engage them often enough that new staff members of the school believe that you are one of them, even if, technically, you are not.

Also, strong schools can be nested in unexpected places.

Coping with Illness

In recent years, I have continued to learn, this time about the nature and implications of my cancer. I had thought that all "medical problems" were

dealt with solely on the basis of science: “This is the diagnosis; therefore, that must be the treatment.” I have learned that, like schoolchildren, no two chemotherapy patients are quite alike. Diagnosis and the selection of the best potions to address cancer are more an art than a crisp science. My oncologist considered several approaches, checking each with colleagues, and as the infusions proceeded, made careful adjustments. The similarity with school teaching is direct and obvious.

Lesson Learned: Who is one’s doctor matters, and his or her willingness to collaborate and to adjust the selected plan, even sharing decisions with the patient, matters too.

Lessons Learned by Looking Back

What CES and Parker represent is one sort of “reform” at the grassroots level that takes place at a particular time in a particular region. They embody some of best current practice. However, recent scholarship and writing suggests the need to look again at the provocative and useful work that is emerging.

A little known scholar, among professional educators at least, is the economist and political scientist Edward Banfield. His work on what he calls “social capital” goes back several decades. Banfield argues that social organizations—community—are crucial. At our best, humans are peace-loving and gregarious, and our institutions are—for the sake of convenience as well as out of necessity—*deliberate* communities: That is, they have an intended public purpose and duty.

Schools are, of course, surely the most, or one of the very most, universally accepted communities. Few educational administrators and public policy advocates, stuck in the grip of the past as though it were Gospel, have picked up on this line of thinking; indeed, many are not even aware of it.

What to do? We need to *read, write, and discuss more*. I have enjoyed writing since I was a young man, and have been grateful for the many “conversations” I have had with friends and strangers through the

medium of my books. Such advice sounds both stale and obvious, but it is unquestionably needed.

We need to *never stop thinking*. A person has to keep at any subject or topic that clearly means a great deal to him or her. Politics, for example: One has to keep regular tabs on what his or her representative is doing. One has to take the time to visit that representative so that he or she has some sense of who you are. One has to follow the progress of a proposed law through the process at the Capitol or State House. One's representative has to know that you have a fair grasp of the details of what is being proposed.

Keep reading. Keep up with the news. Regularly read several newspapers and journals, as the topics chosen may present different points of view, from those of *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, the *Boston Herald*, and *The Nation*. Discuss what you read with others.

All healthy democracies depend on well informed and engaged citizens. Even as the candidates and representatives think in terms of pressure groups and conduct "focus groups" to detect the interests of those political blocs, just one citizen can make a difference. Her or his representative will know that an engaged citizen can readily be influential. Democracy is a one-by-one business. So, hang in there. One can make a difference in the political arena even if that "difference" seems small in contrast to affairs of state that have higher profiles. What is politically or educationally "hot" at any given moment may not be so even a few months later. Keep at it!