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## A Quiet Voice

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One afternoon years and years ago, when I taught at Watkinson School in Hartford, Connecticut, I showed my students slides of contemporary paintings. Jackson Pollacks, Piet Mondriens, Gustav Klimts and Picassos. I was trying to help them see the importance of the work. The students were restless, frustrated, growing more annoyed with me with each passing image. I realized too late that they were too young for whatever brilliant thing I was trying to do. Discouraged in exactly the way kids don't realize they can discourage a teacher, I shut down the projector and was placing it back on its cart when Danny said "What's so good about any of these paintings anyway? I could have painted them?" And before I could turn around and begin to think of how to respond, Jonas, without missing a beat, said, "Yeah, but you didn't."

I was 21, and though that was not the only time I've been schooled by one of my students, it was the first. From that moment, everything about class changed. Jonas, eighth grade Jonas, was suddenly the teacher, telling the rest of us what was true, what I could never have thought to say: that thinking to paint that way and then daring to do it was committing an act of greatness.

As the principal of the Francis Parker Charter Essential School, I'm sometimes asked to talk or write about the school's commitment to the CES Common Principles, or what it means to be a "Coalition School." Over the years, as I have undertaken this challenge, I've been struck by the difficulty in doing the task justice. To understand the Common Principles is to acknowledge their inherent irony; they are deceptively complex and extraordinarily nuanced, while simultaneously sounding exactly like common sense. They are 10 independent statements that rely upon, implicate, and create trouble for each other. They assume the best intentions of all educators, yet warn us against the temptation to overproduce schools or convolute their purpose. They convey all that needs to be said about the form and function of a good school without ever prescribing what one looks like. They lay down the law without ever being doctrinaire. And they make it seem so very simple to create schools that will be the thoughtful places our students and teachers deserve. Those Principles function simultaneously as the spine and the soul of a school, and lay an extraordinarily elegant foundation for the grueling work of translating theory into practice. After 15 years, there is still not a week that goes by where we at Parker School do not look to the principles for direction, clarity, or inspiration.

The Common Principles have been at the very center of my professional practice since just after my encounter with Danny and Jonas. When I first read Ted Sizer's writing and learned about the Coalition of Essential Schools, I felt as though he was talking directly to me. Not only did every word of the then nine Common Principles make sense, but after reading Ted's work, my own teaching also started to make more sense. I began to understand and therefore become more deliberate about the moves I was making with my students. I had known enough to understand instinctively that theatre and the arts were the perfect context for real and meaningful learning for kids. I had seen that there was no more perfect exhibition than the one that took place on the stage, but now I had the back-up of a disciplined and explicit language to help make sense of the power of the arts to transform students. I was asked by my colleagues to help them to infuse elements of the arts into their classes, into science, literature, history, Spanish. With the notion of tying together the relevant courses of study in order to help students to see more clearly the interconnected nature of the world and the ways in which ideas in one domain can be intrinsically linked to seemingly disparate subjects, the arts became a vehicle through which students could demonstrate and express their learning and a disciplined world unto themselves, where the stored, creative potential of students could be exposed and explored. A study of the war in Bosnia was transformed from lists of dates and events to a danced biography of a refugee, a monologue, a piece of original music. By doing the same physical warm-up exercises and tools for creating physical neutrality that actors use, biology students could isolate and

experience their own skeletal systems in ways that transcend mere textbook memorization. Because the arts place students in the very center of their learning by demanding that the physical realm integrate with the intellectual and social realms, they seemed to me to exemplify the kind of teaching and learning called for in the Common Principles. Through Ted's writing and through his quiet, revolutionary voice, I found my own voice as a teacher. And the deeper I got into my teaching, the closer I was getting to becoming a leader.

It was a natural transition for me to accept the invitation to work at Parker, which Ted co-founded. His voice in person was every bit as warm and wise as it is in his books. He prodded and coached me as a school leader. He asks the questions no one else can think to ask, he understands the power of words and the importance of the shadows of those words. And when he talks to me, I feel like I'm the only person in the world.

I owe my professional life to Ted Sizer. His decision to investigate the world of the American high school and expose the danger of perpetuating the status quo that existed in schools combined with his gift for inspiring thoughtful people to take up the urgent work without frightening them created a movement that has shaped the direction of modern American education. He has done all this and more, with an unassuming brilliance that is quietly persistent, unendingly optimistic, and a sense of hope that means business.

Every once in a while, I hear myself starting from scratch, trying to explain the Common Principles to someone who is not familiar with Parker School, a school built from the inside out by the words and the intentions of Ted's vision. I can't make them sound flashy; they are too good for that. Know students well. Help them to use their minds well. Don't try to do everything; focus on what's essential. What's essential is best decided by the people who are there. Respect teachers and give them the tools and the authority to do their work. Be decent. Expect great things. In theory, it sounds easy enough. Those elegant, simple ten Common Principles sound like they could have been written by any of us....but they weren't. They are born of Ted and his quiet, patient, insistent mind, from his beautiful heart.

Yes, in theory it sounds so easy.

In practice, it is enough work for a lifetime.

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A six-year public secondary school of choice, the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School is open by lottery admissions to all residents of Massachusetts in grades seven through 12.

One of Massachusetts' first charter schools, Parker was started in 1995 by area parents and teachers committed to the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. The school was named after Francis W. Parker, the 19th-century New England educator who is known as the father of American progressive education. Theodore R. Sizer and Nancy Sizer are trustees of the school and participate actively in its ongoing development and work; they served as co-principals in 1998–99. In 2009–2010, Parker enrolls 395 students from 40 towns in north central Massachusetts; the socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational characteristics of the student body closely reflect the general population of the region. The class of 2000, which entered in fall 1995, was the first to graduate. The Parker School has a distinguished and dedicated faculty. Of the school's 62 teachers and professional staff, approximately two-thirds hold advanced degrees. Parker teachers work together for three weeks every summer to develop the school's curriculum and its unique program. All teachers serve as advisor to students, nurturing their intellectual, emotional, social, and ethical development. Parker gives top priority to keeping teaching loads at a level where every student can be known very well. As faculty members at Parker commit to the development and achievement of their students, they also commit to one another's professional growth, believing what current educational researchers are proving: sustained collaboration and critical conversations among teachers benefits and boosts student learning.

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Teri Schrader is in her ninth year as Principal of the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School and Director of the Theodore R. Sizer Teachers Center in Devens, Massachusetts. Schrader has worked at Parker for 14 years, previously teaching Arts and Humanities. Prior to her arrival at Parker School, Ms. Schrader taught for 14 years at the Watkinson School in Hartford, Connecticut, where she directed the Creative Arts and Theatre Arts programs. As a teacher-leader, her work focused on the development of arts-based curricula and the

assessment of integrated curricula and other aspects of performance-based promotion as they relate to exhibition and public presentation. At Watkinson, Schrader was a charter member of the National School Reform Faculty, developing the blueprint for faculty-wide participation in Critical Friends Groups. She is a Critical Friends Group coach at Parker and is a national facilitator for the work of developing Critical Friends Groups within schools across the country aiming to make a difference in student achievement by developing the conditions for sustained professional growth of teachers. Schrader lives in central Massachusetts with her husband, also an educator, and their two sons.

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