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Sustaining the Mission of CES Schools

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As years pass, we all face the general human condition of becoming tired, complacent, and, at times, not interested in further improvements. For example, Samantha, an excellent veteran teacher leader who was a prime mover of the creation of her CES high school 25 years ago says, “After all these years, I can’t believe that I am thinking of transferring to a conventional high school where I can shut off my work at 3:30 p.m. each day and be left alone. I love this school, and I don’t feel good about thinking this way but, when we were at the beginning of our change process, I enjoyed working 12-hour school days and weekends. But now, as I get older, I just don’t have the same energy and may need more balance to my life.” We doubt Samantha will actually make such a move, but her concerns are legitimate. And toward the end of this essay, we shall get back to Samantha in discussing sustainability of CES schools.

The two of us share a deep interest about how CES schools can sustain a progressive, democratic vision of education that remains true to its origins as it celebrates its 25th anniversary. Many CES schools have been wonderful to watch over the years. These schools have surpassed expectations in their percentage of graduates, scholarships awarded students for post-secondary schools, and graduates who as adults have better health, intact families, occupations, and participation in their communities than comparable students from conventional high schools.

The often cited, but consistently ignored, purpose of public education is to prepare students to be free-thinking and valued citizens of an always renewing democratic society. CES schools have been true to this broader mission when they challenge students to demonstrate, apply, and contribute their learning to settings outside the classroom and school walls. But there also are CES schools that struggle to keep to their purpose while complying with high stakes requirements of district, state, and federal agencies.

Anyone who has worked in a Coalition school can attest that the work isn’t easy, and the standards and expectations for all—students, faculty and staff members, parents, and community members—are high. The need to appreciate, protect, and support those who work in CES schools will loom even larger as the current standards and accountability movement reinforces traditional conceptions of grade levels, subject knowledge, and uniformity of instruction.

School Cultures Influence their Responses

That standards and accountability movement forces nearly all schools to react. A helpful way of thinking about schools’ responses to the climate of high-stakes testing is the following broad categorization:

Test-driven schools: These are small or large conventional schools that see the major focus of their work as raising student test scores on state end-of-course exams and/or state standardized assessments required for state graduation. Teachers and school leaders work hard to align their work with the state standards and objectives that will be assessed. They may be sympathetic to having students learn in more active, thematic, and participatory ways, but pragmatically, they do not see how to do so with the state requirements bearing down on them.

“Doing all right” schools: These are large or small conventional schools that generally are not concerned about state testing requirements, as their students comparatively rank high on state measures. Teachers don’t feel any great pressure and as a result, they teach as they prefer in their own classrooms and departments and live comfortably with their “doing all right” status. The school is structured like most high schools, with infrequently occurring elements such as school-wide thematic planning, authentic assessments, and student demonstrations, and little work done to re-think the broader curriculum.

Mission-driven schools: In mission-driven schools, faculty members see their work as much bigger than what the state requires of them. They see education as a problem-solving, inquiry-based endeavor that is best done by having flexible interdisciplinary teams that work with cohorts of students over time. They view assessment not as a high-stakes state test but as the skills and understanding their students have learned to apply to citizenship, employment, health, personal interests, and aesthetic appreciation. Faculty members work together, share, and critique each other to reach this far broader mission and their greatest concern is the way students navigate the adult world beyond high school. CES schools are a significant portion of mission-driven schools, schools that practice what they believe in order to create places of learning that support young people and the adults who teach them.

The questions for us are: how can more schools become mission-driven, and how can mission-driven schools sustain themselves? As we examine what we have learned from successful and unsuccessful schools, it first might be helpful to know about the writers who have the hubris to suggest what might be done in CES schools in the future.

April Peters

I am an African American female educator under the age of 40. I came to education in a nontraditional manner in 1993, as a Teach for America (TFA) Corps member. (TFA is a two year teaching corps that places recent college graduates in high poverty, under-resourced schools. A unique feature of this program is that the teachers that are placed are not education majors, but rather have come to the program from a variety of other disciplines.) I have seen many young, beginning teachers with great talent and potential for teaching students in high-poverty situations leave the profession after their first few years. Also, I have witnessed more experienced and initiating educators become disillusioned. For example, after completing my two-year commitment to TFA, and earning a Masters in Social Work degree, I became a founding faculty member of a public charter school in Newark, New Jersey. My most memorable and positive experience was as dean of students at this school, where the CES Common Principles (while not explicitly embraced) were implemented successfully. Several Coalition Principles resonated within our work:

Less is more, depth over coverage: Our school was structured to focus on the intellectual development of the learner. No less hindered by external high stakes achievement goals measured by state tests than any other school in the state, our focus centered on facilitating student learning and mastery of competencies. Student confidence increased tremendously because students were secure in what they knew.

Personalization: The school design included small classes (18 students per class and 36 per grade). Students were well known to all of the adults in the building. Decisions about students included all of the adults who taught or provided services to the students.

Demonstration of mastery: The school engaged in "authentic assessment." Students demonstrated what they knew and could do before a panel of teachers, community members, and parents. Evaluation was based upon a rubric rather than a "grade." Rubrics were shared with students as a tool to learn and improve progress.

A tone of decency and trust: Each student and faculty member embraced the idea of the school as a community. Each member of the community was responsible for upholding the Core Values of the community. Students were encouraged to use the language expressed in the Core Values (caring, respect, responsibility, and justice) and did so regularly.

As a result of this experience, I was inspired by the energy, enthusiasm and hunger for learning of students who had been counted out by a district taken over by the state, by parents who were concerned about their children's academic and social well being, by faculty members who worked harder than any professionals I have ever known, and by the many visitors who were impressed by our work as a school community. Most of all, I was inspired by the school's visionary leadership. Now, more than 10 years later and with the usual turnover of teachers, principals, and district leadership, the school continues to thrive and attract new educators who want to be part of this legacy.

Based on seeing how powerful a school could be, I was excited about the idea of creating new small high schools with similar values, so I moved to a large urban district in Maryland as the principal of a new small school that was being created. Although I had great enthusiasm for founding this new school, I soon became

discouraged with the lack of financial and human resources promised but not provided by the district. I had been told that our school would have autonomy to purchase our own materials, to receive waivers, and to hire our own personnel. We expected to have extra time for creating, planning, and implementing a unique vision for our school. None of these commitments made by the school district were forthcoming. I found that my experiences were not uncommon among other principals charged with creating small, progressive high schools. Many school district administrators had received funds to create such schools but in reality, they had very little understanding of the needed changes in curriculum, assessment, and teaching and staffing practices. They only embraced the "small" part of the idea. I left after two years, and since then, there have been three more principals in this school over the past four years. Since I left the school, I have been studying a number of newly created small high schools in urban areas and my conclusions are that:

Without proper support (finances, resources and personnel), these schools become smaller versions of a bigger problem.

The system works with fragmented objectives, rather than in tandem. Schools are responsible for a la carte implementation of best practices (e.g. advisory, small class size, etc.) without a clear understanding of how each goal is connected with the overall goal of the reform.

These schools and their objectives are not viewed as different from the traditional schools at a district level. If this were so, care would be taken to staff and support them differently. Thus, the support could be tailored to the needs of the schools and their students (much the same way we expect teachers to differentiate instruction for the needs of their individual students—a way of systemically modeling expectations).

Carl Glickman

I am a White male in my mid-60s who came into education as a Teacher Corps intern in 1968. (Teacher Corps was a federal anti-poverty program to attract liberal arts students into education and place them in high need areas). Over the two years of the program, I taught with other interns in a small, isolated rural town in Virginia in the still segregated public schools; the following year was the first year of integrated schools. Due in large part to stress, more than 60 percent of my cohort group of interns left before the end of the second year. Next, I moved to New Hampshire as a young principal (age 26) of a local neighborhood public school in a working class mill town. In this school, we prepared and certified our own teaching staff and all staff members were fully involved in democratic governance of the educational programs.

We had a very low teacher attrition rate even though teacher salaries were among the lowest in the state and region. Over my short tenure, I didn't have a single teacher leave due to dissatisfaction with work, colleagues, or students and in my last year, we were awarded an outstanding school practices award by the state. However after only three years, I decided to leave, due to the challenge of dealing with incessant community controversy among a very small but very vocal minority of parents. I had the highest regard and affection for the school's teachers and I had great support from the district leadership, but I probably was too young to think about the long term. Without any means of communicating with educators and school leaders from other innovative, progressive schools, I felt intellectually and professionally alone. Fortunately my departure did not have a detrimental effect on the school. Faculty members were involved in the hiring process and chose a successor who sustained and improved upon our previous efforts. What I have learned from my experiences and studies over 30 years is the need to:

Ensure that school leaders have a network of similar schools and leaders to support each other to share and critique each other's work.

Provide great involvement and collective authority to the faculty and staff members over hiring, staffing, curriculum, scheduling, assessment, and commitments to carrying out the core principles and practices.

Accept that there will be educators who might appear irreplaceable, but who can be replaced by equally talented persons who want to be at this particular school because of its vision, collegiality, and intellectual stimulation.

Kitchen Table Discussion: What Schools Need to Remain Mission-Driven

After writing our separate pieces above, the two of us spent an afternoon around the kitchen table trying to draw some joint conclusions about sustaining CES schools and the Coalition itself. The schools we have examined were both regular public schools and charter public schools and of course, charter schools had more autonomy from their very beginnings. We also noted that in-district CES schools that have succeeded had a very clear delineation of responsibilities and authority understood and supported by both the school district and their teacher unions.

We jointly believe that:

Districts and states need to understand and support the special context of high schools with a collective mission as different from conventional high schools that have no collective mission and little cross-grade level and inter-departmental practices. District leaders will be more willing to understand and support mission-driven schools when they are continually reminded by school leaders the ways that the school will be different and accountable, and the ways that the work of the school will inform other high schools both in and outside the district. This explanation of a wider purpose is consistent with President Barack Obama's comment made in Denver in May 2008 while running for office: "...we can meet high standards without forcing teachers and students to spend most of the year preparing for a single, high-stakes test.... Accountability does not need to come at the expense of a well-rounded education. It can help complete it — and it should."

Networks of teachers and school leaders within and across CES schools, such as the CES Small Schools Network, need to be expanded as sources of critique and help for each other. The key idea behind a network of school people is to offer intellectual stimulation for what is possible in education by learning each other's practices, providing social and professional support, and helping to change external policies. The old adage is true that there is strength in numbers.

By developing prototype assessments through collaboration with other mission-driven school renewal networks and policy organizations, CES schools could take on a pivotal role for developing these broader assessments to be used by the mainstream of high schools. For example, at the same time that federal legislations seems to be tightening high stakes tests, there is an outcry from business leaders and state governors for better and more challenging inquiry oriented assessments. The natural outgrowth of this would be for mission-driven schools, in different regions, and with a variety of socioeconomic populations, to develop a process by which individual schools and districts become "Prototype Schools" and "Prototype Districts." These schools and districts would have special authority to develop their own standards and assessments that have the potential to be more relevant and rigorous than the ones currently being used by the state and nation.

What the Coalition has accomplished in its first 25 years has been staggering. What began as a study and then a book by Ted Sizer, *Horace's Compromise*, has created a groundswell of rethinking education and influencing thousands of schools. The work of CES's schools propelled the charter school and small school movements in the United States. The issue now is to take the CES principles—including "student as worker," "personalization," "less as more," "graduation by exhibition"—and the related practices to inform the broader mission of public education and rejuvenate our society

In closing, let's return to our friend Samantha. If this stalwart veteran can be supported to keep her life in balance, she will remain a source of great strength to her school for many more years to come. But, if Samantha finds that she doesn't have the stamina to continue, then there is no better legacy than for her to know that there are thousands of younger teachers eager to work in schools that she and other pioneers created, schools where educators are trusted to use their judgment to make the very best decisions with and for students and parents. The challenge is not keeping Samantha at work indefinitely, but keeping the CES mission that she and her colleagues committed to several decades ago alive, well, and stronger than ever.

Co-author Carl Glickman edited *Those Who Dared: Five Visionaries Who Changed American Education*

(Teachers College Press, 2009), which features essays from Deborah Meier, Henry M. Levin, James P. Comer, M.D., John I. Goodlad, and Theodore R.Sizer, with a conclusion by George Wood, that describe the influence of these leaders' personal experiences, contemporary influences on their educational philosophies, and the work they did to put those philosophies into practice. *Those Who Dared* captures the voices of these visionaries who understand that school change leads to societal change, and that such school change happens when we create ways for adults and children to connect with each other as they teach, learn, and make meaning together.

Carl Glickman is President of The Institute for Schools, Education, and Democracy, Inc. and Professor Emeritus of Education The University of Georgia. His newest edited book entitled *Those Who Dared: Five Visionaries Who Changed American Education* (2009) has been recognized as one of the most notable books in education by the National School Board Association and *Supervision and Instructional Leadership*, his textbook coauthored with Stephen Gordon and Jovita Ross-Gordon is now in its eighth edition.

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