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## The Value of Core Principles in the Age of Change

**Type:** Horace Feature

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**Source:** *Horace* Fall 2009, Vol. 25 No. 2 & 3



As I reflect on CES and its groundbreaking, significant work over the past 25 years, I am regularly reminded of the importance of the core guiding principles, even as the educational landscape changes. I was introduced to the work of Ted and Nancy Sizer as an eager undergraduate in summer program in Andover, Massachusetts sponsored by the Institute for Recruitment of Teachers (IRT). The professor told us that we were going to engage in a panel discussion with two dynamic and progressive educators, Ted and Nancy Sizer. Up until that point, I had not read any of the *Horace* books and I knew nothing about the Coalition. The only thing I knew was that when we sat down in this small lecture hall, I was inspired by the seemingly simple concepts that they were discussing. They told us as future educators that we have more influence for positive change than we may think. How we facilitate our classrooms can in fact create a more significant impact on our students than policy on any level. It was then and there that I came to know the guiding principles that I believe should be applied to all schools in order to make each young person's experience at school meaningful and worthwhile. Again, their ideas seemed so simple, yet still foreign from my own educational experiences.

I left the discussion and the IRT program with a new sense of professional purpose and was inspired to work at a school that would honor the time of students and not take the comprehensive approach that I struggled through in elementary and high school. However, I did not know where any of those schools existed. As fate would have it, I was led to Tufts University and subsequently to Fenway High School in Boston. I was aware that Fenway was small, but on the first day of school I realized all of the unique pieces that carefully went into this great learning community. The advisories, portfolios, house system, weekly allotted time for professional development, and a network of inspiring teachers and staff members all played a significant role in the authentic learning environment. I had never seen a collective body of students so engaged. It was the first time that I saw the CES Common Principles in practice. Later in the year, I read *Horace's Compromise* and *Horace's School*. From these practical and theoretical experiences, as I made my transition from student to teacher, I was focused on working at a small school that used the Common Principles to guide and shape its daily agenda. With this in mind, in 2001 I began teaching at Young Women's Leadership Charter School (YWLCS) in Chicago, a school that had been opened for a year and had just become a member of the Coalition.

In my 10 short years of teaching, I have witnessed many transformations, alterations, and modifications in education. I have been privileged to be a part of some great changes, such as the development of the Small Schools Office in Chicago, an office serving the small schools initiative in Chicago Public Schools that assists the creation and support of small school communities within Chicago by providing a variety of resources as well as research to understand the value of small schools. I have also endured change that has been detrimental to our young people, and they are whom I care about the most. When I started at YWLCS in 2001, No Child Left Behind was enacted. As a result, I witnessed a significant switch from authentic learning and personalized education to the external pressures of standards and high stakes testing.

I have found time and time again that it is important to measure and assess the changes in our learning community against core principles, such as the CES Common Principles, that serve as a foundation for your work. It is easy to get caught up in evolving and potentially miss important factors that may cause you to deviate from your core beliefs. What may seemingly be efficient and effective at providing students with information may include inequitable components that would have a far more detrimental effect on the young people we serve.

I have had the great fortune of being in the classroom at the same school for nine years. I have seen an idea for a school change into the reality of a sustainable small learning community that truly works hard to

provide the best environment for its students. While we have celebrated innovative changes that increased both the quality and effectiveness of our practice, I have also been privy to and a part of trooping through adversity. On both a city- and school-wide level, we have implemented and executed several different initiatives with the hope of improving the teaching and learning for our students. Every year, it seems that we throw out the idea of depth over breadth and try instead to incorporate multiple new ideas and establish numerous programs. We hope that one or two things will stick. While most of the strategies that we implemented served to improve the learning experience for our students, there were some efforts that worked against the progress that we previously made. We continue to test and try out new ideas, hoping that our changes will increase both the quality and effectiveness of preparing our young people for the future. In conjunction with the inevitable and in most cases necessary change, I have found that the Common Principles can also serve the role of a compass, guiding our school community through some of the more difficult questions. Throughout the many changes that have occurred in these recent years, we have had to consistently refer back to the question of equity as it relates to our students and their family. Tapping into the “tenth” Common Principle that focuses on fostering democracy and equity, YWLCS educators have been pushed to ask such questions as, “Is this truly equitable for our students or are we pushing for this change because it would be comfortable for us as a staff?”

As I continue to work hard for and in progressive educational communities, I am aware of all of the constraints placed on us from the external world. I know that change is necessary to meet the needs of our young people and their current realities. I also know that amidst the necessary change and progress—and the developing needs of our students—that the principles are the foundation that we need to consistently draw from to keep the focus on creating authentic and equitable school communities.

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Young Women’s Leadership Charter School (YWLCS) is a small all-girl public charter school located on the South Side of Chicago with the mission of “inspiring urban girls to engage in rigorous college preparatory learning in a small school focused on math, science and technology that nurtures their self-confidence and challenges them to achieve.” The school, which opened its doors in 2000, is celebrating 10 years of serving young women from all over the city. The school currently serves 360 students from 30 different communities throughout Chicago in grades seven through 12. YWLCS uses four pillars—Academic Achievement, Career and College Preparation, Leadership and Personal and Social Development—to support its mission-driven work. The school joined the Coalition of Essential Schools in 2001 and became a Mentor School within the Small Schools Network in 2006.

YWLCS is currently ranked sixth among all Chicago public high schools in percentage of students entering college or other formal post-secondary education programs. Last year, the school had a 90 percent college/post-secondary program acceptance rate, a rate that the school has maintained since its first graduating class in 2004. YWLCS recently welcomed two new co-directors, Michelle Russell and Chandra Sledge, and continues to strive as a small, sustainable, and equitable school community.

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Adelric McCain came to Young Women’s Leadership Charter School of Chicago (YWLCS) in 2001, after completing his pre-service work at Fenway High School in Boston, Massachusetts the previous year. Exposure to programs such as Benjamin E. Mays Teacher Scholar Program at Morehouse College, and Tufts’ Urban Teacher Training Collaborative, which led him to Fenway, has inspired and influenced his practice. He currently serves as a humanities teacher, content area facilitator and CES Coordinator for YWLCS.

This resource last updated: October 30, 2009

**Database Information:**

<b>Source:</b> <i>Horace</i> Fall 2009, Vol. 25 No. 2 & 3
<b>Publication Year:</b> 2009
<b>Publisher:</b> CES National
<b>School Level:</b> All
<b>Audience:</b> New to CES, Teacher, Parent
<b>Issue:</b> 25.2