Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School

By Theodore R. Sizer

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Horace Smith is a twenty-eight-year veteran English teacher who moonlights at a liquor store and who, due to his 120-student load, must compromise on the amount of written work he assigns, reads, and critiques. As it is, with extracurricular activities, Horace ends up working a sixty-hour week. His daughter, a first year lawyer, is earning $32,000. Horace earns $27,300. He's a good teacher, a conscientious teacher, but bitter and frustrated. He represents a dedicated core of professionals. In Horace, a fictitious composite, we see flashes of ourselves and our colleagues.

The problems facing American teachers such as Horace are highly complex, multifaceted, and frequently ill-defined. Too often, however, television and print journalists feed the general public a pabulum of oversimplified, condensed, and sometimes sensationalized solutions. Though, for many, this mass-media approach makes for an entertaining evening of viewing or, as in the case of magazines, easy reading for the bus ride home, it lacks academic substance and documentation and does not contribute greatly to the layperson's understanding of the problem or appreciation of its complexity and magnitude. Thankfully, Theodore Sizer's *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*, written specifically for the lay reader, fills this need.

Sizer, a former Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University and former Headmaster at Phillips Academy (Andover), primarily bases his observations on a five-year-long study of adolescent education involving dozens of high schools, public and private, in fifteen states. The five-year inquiry, *A Study of High Schools*, was undertaken "in the late 1970s" and was sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Commission of Educational Issues of the National Association of Independant Schools.

Sizer's is one of several publications emerging from *A Study of High Schools*. In addition to the wonderfully descriptive observations of adolescent education found in *Horace's Compromise*, Sizer introduces his lay readers to the pertinent and important literature of such figures as John Dewey, B.F. Skinner, Michael Rutter (*Fifteen Thousand Hours*), Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Charles Silberman, Jerome Bruner, Mortimer Adler, and others. This synthesis of classroom observations with the seminal literature results in a well-documented work of substance and merit. It is a happy amalgam of the practical and the theoretical, and while Sizer's highly descriptive and pleasing writing style is lay-reader oriented, it retains its literary integrity, never succumbing to sensationalism or superficiality.

In his Introduction, Sizer urges "renewed public attention to the importance of teaching in high schools and to the complexity and subtlety of that craft." Sizer's vision of a renaissance in American education would "restore to teachers and to their particular students the largest share of responsibility for the latter's education." Sizer's goals and his message possess far-reaching implications.

Sizer divides his discussion into its most obvious components: Students, Program, Teachers, and Structure. The majority of the text, however, examines the triangle of students, teachers, and subject. Though this organizational breakdown renders a large and potentially unwieldy topic manageable, the greatest strength of Sizer's presentation is his stylistic technique. His character portrayals unearth universal basics to the art of teaching as well as surprising parallels between subject specialties. Consider, for example, Charles Gross, an electricity teacher at a vocational-technical high school with a large minority student enrollment. Gross's students are interested in his class because they recognize its "applications within a world they (know)." As his students work on the wiring of buildings that are being renovated, Gross emphasizes precision and attention to detail.

Similarly, working with an entirely different group of students, Sister Michael, a seventy-two-year-old nun, emphasizes precision of language and the importance of attending to such details as word choice. Her seminar-type discussion of Graham Greene's "The Destructors" appears far removed from Mr. Gross's electricity classroom, yet, as Sizer notes, both are fine examples of the craft of teaching and both exhibit striking parallels despite widely differing subject matter. Mr. Gross and Sister Michael emphasize and value essentially the same concerns. Just as "there was no sloppy language in Sister Michaels' domain," so "precision, logic, hypothetical thinking, clarity of expression—all were staples of Gross's classroom." In both instances, learning is viewed as a process that requires active coaching: "Sister Michael made sure that each of her students knew that whatever was said in class was important and Mr. Gross, in his strikingly different milieu, did likewise."

The character portraits of teachers, students, and to a lesser extent, administrators, give Sizer's discussion a naturalistic quality, almost anecdotal. As a stylistic device and an evaluative tactic this approach is effective and quite illustrative. Sizer strives to give the reader "the essential 'feel' of the schools" and in this regard he excels. Classroom sights and sounds are described with humor and with an eye for detail. Little escapes Sizer's scrutiny. He takes his audience into a classroom of students moving "their chairs simply by using their feet as oars, clumsily duck-waddling themselves to and fro" and zooms in on the girl who during science class, "took out her compact, popped the mirror open, and went over her face in detail, squinting at each incipient blemish, poking here and rubbing there." Further, with regard to classroom distraction, Sizer issues the following humorous indictment: "Public address systems are the most malevolent intruder into the thinking taking place in public school classrooms since the invention of the flickering flourescent light."

As noted above, Sizer's identification of crucial issues confronting American high schools represents a skillful synthesis of his own empirical research and pertinent studies of other researchers of some repute and will undoubtedly prove to be palatable to most. His solutions, however, may be somewhat problematic in their simplicity and brevity. Many, like a colleague of mine, may simply write Sizer's recommendations off as "pie in the sky" and others might term "elitist" his proposed four-course curriculum of Inquiry and Expression, Mathematics and Science, Literature and the Arts, and Philosophy and History. The individualized attention and coaching that such a curriculum would demand could be perceived as idealistic or academically naive. Some teachers will be threatened when Sizer razes traditional walls of subject matter specialties in an effort to provide students with continuity in their daily learning. Too often, he notes, students perceive no relationship between the thinking done in different disciplines.

Sizer contends that three areas of mastery should prevail: literacy, numeracy, and civic understanding. In an allusion to decompulsorizing high school education, Sizer suggests that these three "chestnuts of American educational thought" could conceivably be mastered before high school. From this point forward, the high school could offer its four-course curriculum as "an opportunity, not an obligation," concentrating on the more sophisticated cognitive skills associated with critical thinking.

Nowhere does the author purport that his recommendations are a panacea. Rather, the thrust of Sizer's argument is that the public must be made aware of the problems confronting American high schools and, with a spirit of inquiry and trust in that "sizable core of fine teachers and administrators," examine solutions.

Horace's Compromise awakens our senses. In prose that is lucid, concise, and sensitive to the lay audience, Sizer articulates his findings and with reasonable objectivity, speculates on the implications. Acknowledging this, my greatest concern is whether this book will be read. Many may sample its

pages, but I fear few will read this critically and ruminate on it. In *Horace's Compromise* Sizer has published an important work. His message deserves the public's attention.