Horace's Legacy: Learning with Purpose, A Proposal to Add Two New Common Principles

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"Purpose serves as a principle around which to organize our lives." -Anonymous

There's a story told about a farmer from Nebraska. It seems that every year the farmer grew amazing, award-winning corn. Each summer he entered his corn in the State Fair where it always won the blue ribbon. One year, a newspaper reporter interviewed the farmer and learned something interesting and unexpected—the farmer's secret was sharing his best seed corn with his neighbors. "How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors when they are entering corn in the competition with yours each year?" the reporter asked.

"Why sir," said the farmer, "Didn't you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbors grow good corn." This farmer has come to be wonderfully aware of the connectedness of life. His corn cannot improve unless his neighbor's corn improves.

So it is with education, and the power and value of a cross-pollinating coalition of schools committed to doing and being more for the young people with and from whom we teach and learn. It has been over 25 years since most of us met Horace Smith in Horace's Compromise. As a veteran teacher, he fought the creeping disillusionment and cynicism many in the education field experience at times. He did so by asking questions and having the courage and gumption to start a conversation with colleagues about their school, which was really with us about our schools. From those early conversations with Horace, new ones emerged. Some were among those who wanted to go deeper with the questions about creatively redesigning ways to approach teaching and learning. Yet others, those who didn't see a need to abandon or challenge the status quo, wanted to discuss the ways that emphasizing rote coverage of a canon of knowledge would be the mark of "cultural literacy." Today, while there have been some impressive and transformational changes and improvements in the ways many schools function, a large proportion of schools remain fixed in what some may refer to as "tried and true" even if that means "tired and blue" for those relegated to teaching and learning in such settings. It doesn't and shouldn't have to be this way.

"Tired and blue" describes the outdated view that education is a passive phenomenon that happens to students in a confined teacher-led classroom. When students ask why they need to know something, teachers say, "Because." When they ask when they will use what they're being taught, they're told, "Someday," Even though research and common sense tells us this is not the way most people naturally learn, it is still the norm. Disconcertingly, it appears that a large majority of educators, parents, and policymakers still hold onto the view that the role of school and the purpose of education are simply to prepare students for some potential or future utility.

John Dewey knew this approach was wrong 90 years ago when he asserted, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life." In our gym/assembly hall are eight belief statements that are core ideals for the school. One of them echoes Dewey's sentiments: "We believe that learning can be of value to students in their present lives, not just for the future, and that students have a place in, and can make contributions to, their [present] society." Recognizing the creative and committed spirit and energy that live in young people, forward-thinking schools have been able to show impressive results in student success (using both conventional and more authentic means of measurement) by trying to do what Mark Twain urged: by getting school out of the way of education as much as possible. A central practice for getting school out of the way is providing students with place-based learning opportunities that allow the community to be the classroom.

These in-the-field educational experiences can include taking water samples from local lakes and ponds and tracing possible contaminants over time, working with the city traffic engineer to study walking patterns or developing bike lanes, serving as a research assistant at a local lab or university, or participating in another kind of mentored internship or an extended, in-depth integrated study through a mentored academic placement such as a pre-med program. When we present students with real problem-based issues and scenarios that allow them to apply existing skills and knowledge and identify what they need to know and be able to do in order to be part of the solution, they are highly motivated. They can immediately answer for themselves those oft-answered questions of why and when. Antioch University New England's David Sobel, author of several books and essays on place-based education, says that beyond the educational value for students, the "goal is to create models that help" inspire other organizations. Young people want and need to be empowered, and to feel that what they're learning and doing in school is relevant and purposeful—and this desire doesn't change when we become adults.

Several years ago, before Lance Armstrong's cancer awareness and support organization began selling those bright yellow "LIVESTRONG" rubber bracelets, I remember seeing similar bands that had inscribed "WWJD" that I later learned served as a reminder and inspiration to those who aim to live life according to the teachings and principles espoused by Jesus. As a teacher and principal at Lehman Alternative Community School (LACS) in Ithaca, New York, a long-standing CES school, I have often thought of designing a similar bracelet inscribed with "WWHD"—What Would Horace Do? Or better yet, what questions or concerns would he raise with his colleagues about the state of our schools now? Are we still having the same conversations that we had 25 years ago? Or are there new issues and ideas that need our attention and creative vision? Are the Common Principles still relevant in guiding our network of unique and connected schools? Most of them continue to resonate as powerful and real. Others may no longer speak to us as boldly as they once did. Might the Common Principles need to be revisited, revised, revamped, or expanded? This has, of course, already happened: initially, there were nine Common Principles when the Coalition launched in 1984; CES added the most recent principle, focused on fostering democracy and equity, in 1997.

In celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Coalition of Essential Schools, there seems no better way to honor the legacy of the respectful revolution Ted Sizer and his alter ego Horace Smith than to put forth the call for two new Common Principles to be adopted by our network of forward-thinking schools. Both new Principles are actually well established and in practice at many CES Affiliate schools already, but deserve to be recognized and promoted as key aspects for educating 21st century global citizens.

The two new principles warrant serious consideration, as each serves to place emphasis and recognition of the important need and responsibility to educate for sustainability, as well fostering an ethic of engaged service and involvement in one's community. Let's first share what the two new principles propose:

Common Principle 11: Sustainability
The school will foster an understanding of the dynamic condition that exists, as well as the interconnections and interdependency among ecological, economic, political, cultural and social systems, by teaching and modeling responsible and sustainable practices in the generation and consumption of resources.*

Common Principle 12: Service- and Community-Based Learning
The school commits to developing a school culture in which students are expected and given ample opportunity to serve their communities by applying their growing skills, knowledge and values through direct participation in addressing relevant issues and supporting identified societal needs—locally, nationally and globally.

The French writer and philosopher Voltaire captures the essence of both new principles quite well in his classic Candide, which poses the simple but profound question, "How can one make the world a better place?" "Go, and plant your garden," is the simple response. To better understand how the world works, it's difficult to find a better way than spending some time in a garden, and I was reminded of this truth this past summer. A few weeks before the start of the school year, I was in my office at school, watching buckets of rain pouring outside. Into my office walked Dan Flerlage, a longtime science teacher at LACS, drenched from head to toe—but with the biggest, brightest grin one could imagine. He asked, "Do you want to hear something really cool?" He had spent four hours working with over a dozen of our students weeding and harvesting the vegetable garden that they had planted at the end of the school year on a small plot

generously shared by a nearby farm.

This group of "localvores" not only spent this particular afternoon in the rain tending this garden, but had also scheduled themselves shifts throughout the summer to care for this collective agricultural endeavor. These and other students did the same thing the previous summer in a garden they had created behind our school (sadly, that garden was unceremoniously razed this summer as part of a school facility renovation—thus the borrowed land from the farm up the road). This fall, these same students dedicated even more hours prepping basil for pesto, chopping peppers, onions, tomatoes, and cilantro for salsa, and pickling beans and cucumbers. Much of the yield will be used by the school's student-run café in an effort to promote more nutritious meals, and a portion will be donated to low-income families in our community.

Other staff members and students in our school are part of our school's "Green Team," which has conducted initiatives ranging from a plug-in audit within our building to help inform us how we can better conserve energy to setting up a comprehensive recycling and composting program that has since been replicated district-wide across 12 schools. Senior research teams have presented findings using sophisticated cost-benefit analysis that have demonstrated the long-term value of replacing polystyrene disposal trays with compostable ones—another change adopted district-wide—and they have collaborated with architects on our school's construction project to incorporate green design elements.

At the end of the school year, ninth grade global studies students host a Fair Trade breakfast that that is open to the school and greater community. Students prepare and serve coffee and various breakfast treats using fair trade ingredients and serve as resident experts on the array of topics and issues related to the fair trade movement. This authentic assessment is the final component of their first-year global studies portfolio.

For eight years, students from our Eco-Action Committee, as well as from one of our Ecology courses, have taken part in the annual Bioneers Conference in New Bedford, Massachusetts, as spectators, as workshop leaders, and panel discussion participants. Many of these same students joined forces with area college students and represented our region of New York State at last year's PowerShift lobbying effort in Washington, D.C. They facilitated discussions and served as spokespeople for the entire contingent when meeting with New York House and Senate delegations. These students' mature, diplomatic way of speaking their minds and expressing their convictions earned them a high degree of respect. This experience inspired the students to realize that they have the power to be effective change agents. These are just a few examples of the ways that committed and invested students apply their awareness of the need to be more environmentally, economically and socially conscious and respectful.

LACS's Community Studies class incorporates an ambitious service-learning component. Its 12-14 students dedicate themselves to well over 100 hours of required service-learning throughout the one year course in addition to comprehensive reading and writing. For example, a planned weekly partnership with an area youth detention facility reinforces focused studies on youth incarceration. While it may take a few visits for the young people from the two schools to get comfortable with one another, the facades quickly come down and they make deep connections that lead to collaboration, including an award-winning joint writing project honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Students also learn about the issues and challenges facing the Akwesasne reservation, which is located in upstate New York and crosses into Canada. They focus on furthering the 25-year relationship our school has had with the Akwesasne Freedom School, which works to preserve the Mohawk language by teaching it to the children of their community. Students in the Community Studies class prepare throughout the year by studying the Mohawk culture and the threats its people face, and then fundraise to buy supplies for a 10-day service-learning trip on the reservation.

Beyond this class, which allows self-selected students to get an "in-depth" service-learning experience, all students at our school are required to fulfill a community service expectation ranging from 30 hours for our younger students in grades six through eight to 60 or more hours for students in grades nine through 12. Not all the experiences necessarily involve applying specific learning, but all contribute to the ethic of service to the community. On any given day of the week, there are students involved in our community in a range of ways—through internships with State legislators, working in elementary classrooms and helping to run after-school programs, helping to rehab homes available to low-income families, making public service videos for Planned Parenthood, and more. For the past few years, LACS students have traveled down to New Orleans in May with supplies and their ready labor to assist in the ongoing rebuilding of Wards 7 and 9 that are still decimated from the fury of Hurricane Katrina more than four years ago.

Although in some settings, the approach to incorporating a service component into the curriculum tends to be perfunctory—often an excuse for the elite to pad their resumes, sometimes a way for a school administration to look good through publicized yearly acts of charity. On the flipside, according to Jennifer Holiday in Community Service-Learning: A Guide to Including Service in the Public School Curriculum, "research shows that service-learning can increase students' awareness of diversity and their commitment to values like justice." Experience in our school, which has been a slow process of learning and refining, suggests (as does much of the professional literature) that reflection is critical in order to make service meaningful to students—not only reflection on personal growth, though that is certainly important, but also on the ways the service relates to broader social, political, and economic matters. Curtis Odgen and Jeff Claus, in the introduction to Service Learning for Youth Empowerment and Social Change, forcefully argue, "Service learning should help students go beyond acts of 'charity' to develop the skills and perspectives of critical reflection and action central to the pursuit of constructive social change."

Such beliefs align well with the central goals of the Coalition. At its best, service-learning offers avenues for students to demonstrate "that they can do important things," as the principle on Demonstration of Mastery states; service also allows students to discover genuine ways to challenge various "forms of inequity," as the principle on Democracy and Equity urges. Will this always occur when students undertake service? Surely not. Will teachers be able to integrate service into their lessons each day? No. Yet movement toward authentic engagement with bona fide societal ills and issues, including intense reflection on the difficulty of such work and how it requires multiple perspectives, is critical to keeping learning meaningful and to creating kids that care and know how to take action.

Prior to graduation, LACS requires each of our seniors to organize and host a Senior Meeting. In addition to presenting their individual Senior Project, students are asked to share some reflections about aspects of their learning experience that has been personally meaningful to them and we share a conversation about these. What has been both striking and inspiring is the overwhelming number of graduates who share that the opportunity to be part of a school that expects, fosters, and makes room to apply what they learn in the classroom to serving their community. Advocating for important and real issues is one of the most empowering experiences they take with them on the next leg of their journey. One of our graduates captured it all wonderfully when he shared, "What I do matters. I'm the future. The world is counting on me." Like the farmer and his corn, what this young man and his peers realize is that the welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all, and that the true measure of education is not in what you know, but how you share what you know with others.

That is the legacy of Horace Smith and the "essential" purpose of a principle-based education.

* Definition attributed to Jamie Cloud of the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education

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Lehman Alternative Community School (LACS), a public school in Ithaca, New York, opened in 1974 as a pilot junior-high program with 75 students under the guidance of its founding principal Dave Lehman (the school was renamed in his honor following his retirement from the school in 2004). Over the years, a growing interest and demand for the progressive approach to teaching and learning offered has led to increasing our enrollment several times, always trying to do so in recognition of the value and need to maintaining a small learning community feel and environment. Currently, our enrollment is capped at 275, with students selected via a random lottery process. Students learn together across grades six through 12 in heterogeneous classes, and also actively share in the democratic culture and shared-decision making process throughout their entire secondary level experience. The school formally became a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools in 1987 when the LACS community saw the strong alignment of principles and mission. At the school, there is a strong appreciation of the value and impact that a network of schools banded together can have on reshaping both the conversation and experience that is at the heart of purposeful education.

For an account of CES's addition of the "tenth" Common Principle that promotes democracy and equity, please see *Horace* 14.3, "Democracy and Equity: CES's Tenth Common Principle," available online at

http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/114.

Alternative Community Salsa!

Ingredients:

1 quart of tomatoes (fresh or preserved)
1 medium onion
1-2 jalepeño peppers
3 tablespoons vinegar
1½ teaspoons salt
1 small bunch of cilantro

Instructions:

Combine ingredients and blend to your liking in a food processor.

A few years ago, students in a Senior Seminar took on a research project focused on adolescent sleep patterns. Later, the study was shared with and examined by some members of the school board as partial justification for considering implementing later start times for our secondary schools (there were other factors in play, as well). It was a real thrill for these young researchers and another great example of students contributing a service based on their learning experience in school that impacted a major community decision. In her book *The Shelter of Each Other*, Mary Pipher makes the point that for young people in society today "there's too much information and not enough meaning, and too much happening and not enough time to process it." The Horace in me wrestles with whether there is a more important and salient question that a school district should be asking beyond when young people should begin and end their school day. Instead, maybe we need to invest some time asking if the ways we ask our students (and teachers) spend their time is conducive to the teaching and learning most needed in the years ahead.

I sometimes describe our school as an old sturdy house. While any number of people have called the school home over the years, the only way it has been able to retain its value(s) is through maintenance: everyone takes care that the foundation is preserved so it remains strong and stable. At LACS, and I imagine many other CES schools, we find ourselves at an important crossroads in our evolution. In the not too distant future, some of our longest-serving teachers will be moving on from the school, following several other key people who have already done so. Within them lies a deep wisdom that deserves to be heard and honored. At the same time, the school has continued to prosper due the openness of energy and new ideas introduced by those new to the school.

There is acknowledgement within the school that what it meant to be progressive and alternative in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s may not mean the same now and in the future. What we know is that to continue being the school we always have been over the years, we need to be not what we were, nor what we are now. Rather, we must keep looking for new ways to be. John Goodlad refers to this bold paradox as a "culture of renewal," and it's what is at the heart of what it means to be a truly "progressive" school. When the structural integrity of a foundation is strong and intact, possibilities exist to redefine and redesign space (and time) in ways that can make teaching and learning relevant and powerful in today's rapidly changing world.

Joe Greenberg is in his sixth year serving as principal of Lehman Alternative Community School, located in Ithaca, New York. In addition to his role as principal, Joe teaches a Senior Team Studies course that explores different themes each year and culminates in a series of interdisciplinary team projects. This year's seniors are working with Joe on a study of the future that will lead to a conference being planned by his students on the future of youth voice and empowerment in addressing societal issues. Joe also represents principals in the Ithaca school district on the community's Equity & Inclusion Leadership Council, as well as working on a task force strengthening the collaborative partnership between his school district and Cornell University. He has also been active in working with the League of Democratic Schools, a small but growing

national network of K-12 schools and universities aimed at deepening schools' role in fostering democracy and engaged citizenship for young people.

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