have been influential for more than a century. These distinct characteristics can be categorized, at least loosely, as a tradition within the field. The writers who exhibit these characteristics and, as a result, will be discussed under the heading of pragmatic curriculists include Ted Sizer, Harry K. Wong, John Dewey, and Ralph Tyler. Even though he is not the most well known of the pragmatists included in this chapter, the best place to begin when making sense of the pragmatic tradition is with the contemporary work of Sizer.

Ted Sizer and Pragmatic Curriculum

One prominent educator who stands firmly within a pragmatic curricular tradition is the late Ted Sizer. Sizer, who passed away in 2009, was a dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an author of many books on education, and the founder of an educational reform initiative known as the Coalition of Essential Schools. The Essential Schools movement began with the publication of *Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Published in 1984, the book was the first report Sizer produced following a comprehensive study of American high schools. Sizer and others conducted the study during the early 1980s on behalf of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. *Horace’s Compromise* is an example of pragmatic curriculum for two main reasons. First, even though the book is a report about high schools, Sizer exhibits many of the characteristics of a pragmatic curriculist. He does not claim to have discovered the “one right answer” for how to improve schools; he supported a wide variety of curricular initiatives throughout his long career. Sizer believed in finding “what works” and then spreading this idea (or cluster of ideas) to as many schools as possible, and he is known (even after his death) as a non-ideological contributor to a host of reform initiatives. The second reason *Horace’s Compromise* serves as a good example of pragmatic thinking is found in a composite character that Sizer presents in the book. After conducting many interviews with high school teachers from throughout the nation, Sizer chose to create a composite character, Horace Smith, for whom he named the book. Horace is indeed instructive when it comes to understanding pragmatic curriculum.
Horace Smith's Compromised Curriculum

Horace is a high school English teacher who has been forced to make compromises during his challenging career of twenty-eight years. Sizer uses Horace not just to explain what many high school teachers are like, but to hold up Horace as a hero who has managed to make a continuous impact on students’ lives despite the unsettling and in many respects contradictory compromises he has been forced to make. Sizer presents Horace as someone he agrees with on matters of curriculum and teaching, at least in the way curriculum and teaching must take place given the current context of schooling. Sizer does not disagree with the compromises that Horace has had to make, but rather acknowledges them as realistic, even smart reactions to a difficult context. Sizer is less interested in attempting to influence what Horace is doing than he is in describing the realities of Horace’s teaching life.

Horace began teaching high school English at the age of twenty-five. Now fifty-three, he has had many opportunities to watch teachers come and go, observe countless school reform proposals, and otherwise learn the “tricks of the trade.” Despite many challenging days, Horace loves teaching, is well respected by his fellow teachers, and works hard at his job. He has struggled, however, to get his students interested in plays like Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth* as well as literary classics like *The Great Gatsby* and *All the King’s Men*. Horace has high standards, but due to circumstances beyond his control, he has been forced to lower his standards. He has compromised for the sake of survival. He has been overwhelmed by low expectations from parents, a crushing number of students to teach (more than 120 per day), and a barrage of extracurricular activities. The curricular idealism that brought Horace into the profession more than twenty years ago has been sucked out of him by the pragmatic realities of his job. Horace constantly finds himself compromising what he thinks students ought to learn with the realities of what his circumstances allow him to teach.

One example of Horace’s propensity to compromise can be found in his teaching of writing. Horace believes strongly that all of his juniors and seniors should be writing multiple short essays of at least two pages per week. Furthermore, he believes that, as their teacher, he should read and critique all essays weekly to improve their writing so that they can
communicate successfully through prose. The reality, however, is that Horace faces dozens of students per day, many of whom are low achieving. In addition, students and teachers alike have many distractions within and outside of school—such as pep rallies, athletic events, classroom announcements, state test days, and a torrent of outside-school activities that usurp the time Horace and his students have to improve their writing. These realities force Horace to require students to write only one or two paragraphs per week. Horace’s idealism has been sacrificed at the altar of survival. He has a reasonable chance of success at convincing students to write one or two paragraphs, whereas an assignment of four to five pages would yield little to no work at all. Horace also knows that he has the time to grade 120 papers if they consist of two paragraphs or less. This situation is less than ideal, but it is workable given the pragmatic circumstances that he and his students face. Horace has made compromises not because he likes them but because he wants to survive. He has at times contemplated leaving the profession, but he loves the students and the life of teaching too much to consider that option seriously.

At the root of Horace’s dilemma is a gap between the ideal of what many outside the profession want teachers to accomplish and the reality of what Horace faces each day. Horace is easily irritated by the constant stream of idealism—frequently combined with criticism—that rains down on the teaching profession, almost always from people who have no understanding of what he does. Using Horace as a prototypical example of a high school teacher, Sizer explains:

Most jobs in the real world have a gap between what would be nice and what is possible. One adjusts. The tragedy for many high school teachers is that the gap is a chasm, not crossed by reasonable and judicious adjustments. Even after adroit accommodations and devastating compromises . . . the task is already crushing, in reality a sixty-hour work week. For this, Horace is paid a wage enjoyed by age-mates in semiskilled and low-pressure blue-collar jobs and by novices, twenty-five years his junior, in some other white-collar professions.²

This attitude toward teaching and curriculum is not one rooted in system or in constructing individualized lessons or
in a radical vision for social change. Instead, Horace’s philosophy, if that term is appropriate for it, is one of drawing upon whatever resources are available to make it through each day. Horace is much less interested in long-term thinking than he is in how to fix the immediate problems in his classroom. He has little inclination—or indeed time—to reflect on the ideal ends of a school’s curriculum. His desire to achieve lofty goals has been drained out of him by the daily grind of difficult students, the monotony of correcting the same grammar mistakes every week, and the contradictory demands placed upon him by a public uncertain of its respect for the teaching profession. In the face of hearing the news of yet another high-sounding reform initiative, Horace is often heard reminding new teachers that the latest fad will never work, that the most recent “new idea” is really very old, and that everyone would be better off if they would just leave him alone. Just give it time, Horace says, and yet another “reform” initiative—this time with a new name—will come along claiming to fix everyone’s problems in one fell swoop. Nothing, however, changes. Nothing ever works, except the compromised curriculum that Horace has cobbled together within the four walls of his classroom. A workable curriculum—not a liberating one—is the only conceivable course of action to Horace. Survival has become an end in itself.

Sizer presents Horace Smith not in order to criticize him but to make the case that those who make educational policy should not force Horace to make these compromises. Rather, they should change school structures so that Horace has a reasonable number of students to teach, is not overburdened with duties outside of teaching, and is given respect by the general public for the role he plays in American culture. What is most central to the purpose of this book, however, is not so much the plan for school reform that Sizer presents, but rather the views of curriculum that undergird his work. Sizer presents Horace as someone who is effective given his circumstances and who should be admired for making things work. In addition, when Sizer moves beyond his depiction of Horace to providing his own vision for curriculum, many of the pragmatic tendencies found in Horace are also present in Sizer’s own views.

Sizer’s Pragmatic System

Sizer rejects the systematic thinking that he contends has led to many, if not all, of Horace’s problems. Sizer blames
the obsession with system building on progressive reformers from the early twentieth century who sought to “fix” all educational problems with efficiency, measurement, and bureaucratic control. He argues that school bureaucracies have crushed the idealism that brought Horace into the profession. Teachers have little time left to foster creativity within themselves or their students because “twentieth-century Americans’ breathless belief in systems to run their lives tilts the scale markedly toward predictable order. . . . Progressive reformers placed great faith in ‘scientific management.’ Rational, politics-free system, driven by dispassionate professionals, was their cure for the country’s ills of chaos.”

Sizer goes on to acknowledge that system and bureaucracy have a role to play, but he also maintains that their overemphasis has had a crippling effect on high schools.

Sizer discusses numerous defects that arise from systematic thinking, all of which relate in one way or another to the inability of systematic thinkers to recognize the specific needs of local schools. In other words, systematizers forget conditions on the ground, precisely the factors that govern (indeed control) Horace’s life. Sizer ultimately presents readers with a pragmatic versus systematic choice that leaves little doubt which approach he thinks is best. Sizer wants systematic thinking to be replaced with highly contextualized decision making that keeps schools operating effectively, even if the larger ideals of the school must be surrendered in the name of curricular exigency.

Despite Sizer’s criticism of systematic thinking, he ultimately ends up presenting his own systematic “solution” to improving high school curriculum. In the 1992 edition of *Horace’s Compromise*, for example, he lays out nine principles that must and should serve as the foundation for improvement. These nine principles are the basis, indeed the system, for Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools. Sizer draws upon all three traditions presented previously—an approach common to pragmatists—to argue for what should make up twenty-first-century high schools. He insists that these nine principles are not a “plug in program” that simply can be “installed” but goes on to make the case that all good high schools embody these nine principles. He lists them as follows: a focus on helping adolescents to use their minds well, simple curricular goals organized around the development of skills, universal goals that meet the needs of all students, personalized learning (and curriculum), students as workers
instead of teachers as deliverers, the requirement that students only earn diplomas if they complete an “exhibition” that demonstrates what they have learned, an attitude of trust and high expectations, a staff of principals and teachers who view themselves as generalists first and specialists second, and a school budget that makes plenty of room for collective planning on behalf of the entire school.4

These nine principles are difficult to reject because they are so broad. At the same time, what is clear is that they do indeed constitute a system, a pragmatic one that emphasizes individual circumstances. A pragmatic system is one that is highly flexible, avoids the subject of ultimate ends or ideals, and claims success by the way it “works” to produce results. Sizer’s principles exhibit all of these characteristics. He is less concerned with meaning than he is with utility. The meaning of these nine principles is clouded not only by their lack of specificity, but also by the fact that their general nature allows them to be implemented in hundreds if not thousands of ways. For this reason, a pragmatic curricular philosophy can be popular without necessarily adding coherence or direction to a curriculum. For example, who could disagree with the statement that high schools should focus on helping students to use their minds well? Everyone involved in the improvement of curriculum, of course, subscribes to the idea that students should learn to use their minds. The difficulty lies in making sense of what this statement means—in both theory and practice—when a school attempts to create or revise its curriculum. A reasonable question for Sizer and other pragmatic curriculists to answer is: what should students study as they seek to use their minds well, and to what end are they studying?

The most explicit discussion of curriculum that we find in *Horace’s Compromise* is found in Sizer’s conclusion. After pointing out that his nine principles have frequently been criticized for their ambiguity, Sizer raises the issue of curriculum when he acknowledges that critics often respond by saying: “What of the course of study? You are as vague about the curriculum as you are about standards.” Sizer’s response to this critique is that ambiguity is not only inevitable when creating curriculum but should be embraced as essential to good curriculum making. Sizer touches upon several, although not all, of the curricular commonplaces when he writes, “Care should be taken to remember both that the details of any curriculum must reflect the community and the students served...
and that any ‘course of study’ represents only one point on the triangle of student, teacher, and subject. Alter any one and the others shift—or the triangle breaks.” Sizer’s framework using the “triangle” offers an opportunity to show similarities and differences between the deliberative and pragmatic traditions. There are of course only three elements to Sizer’s triangle, whereas a deliberative tradition operates with five commonplaces. The two commonplaces missing in Sizer’s presentation are the commonplaces of context and curriculum making. Context is such a dominant factor in pragmatic curriculum, however, that the entire framework for pragmatic thinking assumes that curriculum must be rooted in context. Context is so essential that there is no need for Sizer to mention it. That leaves the curriculum making commonplace, which Sizer ignores completely. To his credit, he places the three elements of student, teacher, and subject matter in relationship to one another, but he does not address the issue of how curriculum decisions should be made. He also does not tackle the question of the ultimate end of curriculum. Both of these latter two issues—how decisions should be made and ultimate ends—are essential within a deliberative perspective. Sizer’s triangle ends up either floating in the air without connection to practical decision making, or it becomes embedded so deeply within a unique context that it fails to move a school toward the ideal of a liberating curriculum for all.

Sizer published a number of books in addition to *Horace’s Compromise*, all of which embody his pragmatic, non-ideological approach. At one point, Sizer states the basis for his views most plainly when he writes, “My critique and the plans of the Coalition are the result of common sense and experience.” Pragmatists value empirical results and experience, while at the same time de-emphasizing reflection, purpose, and ideals. Sizer’s pragmatic viewpoint is especially evident in the title of his third book published in the Horace series: *Horace’s Hope: What Works for the American High School*. During his long career, Sizer searched for “what works” so that he could replicate these procedures on a large scale. Like many pragmatic curriculists, Sizer addresses curriculum only as a subset of the larger task of educational administration. This de-emphasis on curriculum as the guiding factor in school improvement leads to a situation in which Sizer stresses different curriculum commonplaces (or parts of his curriculum triangle) at different times depending upon which commonplace is useful in making the argument.
Chapter 5

He wants to make. This strategy does not necessarily lead to an all-encompassing curricular philosophy, but it can produce popular results. We will now turn away from Sizer to a second pragmatic curriculist who has learned this lesson of popularity better than most.

Harry K. Wong and Pragmatic Curriculum

A second example of a pragmatic curriculist may come as a surprise to some readers because he is not necessarily well known as a curriculum writer, nor is he popular within the university environment. Harry K. Wong, however, has become nothing less than famous in the world of K–12 schooling, especially among classroom teachers. A former middle school science teacher and now a popular speaker on the education circuit, Wong earned his EdD degree at Brigham Young University in 1980 after completing a study on the usefulness of behavioral objectives.9 Wong became a national figure after he and his wife published *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher*, in 1990. Now in its fourth edition, *The First Days of School* has sold more than three million copies worldwide. Wong has crisscrossed the nation during the past fifteen years giving speeches on how to become an “effective teacher.” He directs his work primarily to first year teachers, but his speeches and how-to oriented publications appeal to teachers regardless of their experience. The speakers bureau that promotes Wong bills him as “the most sought after speaker in education today, booked from two to four years into the future.”10 Wong is tapping into a widespread impulse within the teaching profession. Not only teachers, but also school administrators, are drawn to Wong’s work because he presents his ideas as a set of solutions. The most frequent subjects that Wong addresses are teaching and learning, but his views on curriculum are implied in *The First Days of School*. To Wong, the success of a teacher’s first year has everything to do with classroom management techniques, research-based procedural skills, and the efficient use of instructional time.

Wong provides useful tips to teachers as they navigate their first year. From the perspective of curriculum, however, *The First Days of School* leaves many unanswered questions. He presents positions that sometimes do not proceed logically. For example, in his introduction to *The First Days of School*, Wong writes, “This book does not contain a plan.