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## Educating the World: Essential Schools as Agents of Change and Influence

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Schools face a relentless torrent of demands without receiving the kinds of support they need and deserve. So it is not easy to expect that they would voluntarily add to their ever-growing lists of responsibilities. And yet ask we must. Essential schools have the responsibility of educating not only their own school communities, but also the larger community about the value, relevance, and requirements of a student-centered education.

Academics and activists can write and speak about schools that are engaging and intellectually challenging, but their words do not match visiting such schools. Experiential learning matters just as much for adults as it does for students. And so it falls to Essential schools to provide opinion and policy makers with the images and experiences of what works, what is possible, and what it takes.

The harmful consequences of not engaging the larger community are evident to us every day. Educators have largely ceded the public debate about education to others. It is certainly true that everyone from parents to policymakers has much to contribute to creating good schools. Yet having attended school, or having children that attend school, does not, as many seem to think, make one an expert.

The art of good teaching is complex. A lack of understanding of this complexity leads to many simplistic policy prescriptions: test-driven accountability, "magic" teacher-proof curriculum, merit pay, paying students for performance, and running schools like businesses. The proponents of these popular fixes for schools largely share the common characteristic of being non-educators. None of these reforms address the nature of teaching and learning, nor do they reflect the growing support among educators for personalization, real-world learning, and performance-based assessment.

My work with the school board in Oakland, California gives me some insight into the affection policy makers have for the simple solution.. We would present detailed plans for improving instruction, and the board would rubber-stamp them after five minutes of discussion. But get into a dialogue about a construction project, or who is getting the contract for yearbook photos, and the board meeting might well last past midnight. School board members gravitated to issues they felt they understood. When it came to an in-depth discussion of the real work of schools, they deferred to the professionals. That's what makes test scores so appealing. They're up, they're down, and suddenly the complex nature of student achievement seems simply quantifiable.

So it falls to you to reverse this course. You cannot simply content yourselves with educating your students, though this remains your most important responsibility. But unless you are resigned like Ted Sizer's Horace to compromise what you know is good for your students, you must begin to demystify constructivist education for the larger public.

Many CES schools do this effectively, particularly those that engage in public exhibitions of student learning. Well-designed exhibitions reveal students thoughtfully engaged in authentic tasks, evaluated on a range of criteria that have obvious utility long after the "test" is over. Exhibitions give real meaning to the notion of accountability and standards by demonstrating to the community what students know and are able to do. Outside experts and other witnesses to these demonstrations of mastery leave with a strong sense of whether the school is adequately preparing students not just for matriculation but for life.

Over the last several years, hundreds of CES schools have participated in National Exhibition Month, deliberately reaching out to a wider audience and exposing that audience to this powerful experience. This

effort has made a difference. In conjunction with the efforts of others, we have helped to shift the conversation about test-based accountability. Earlier this year, Democratic Presidential nominee Barack Obama participated in a student's exhibition during Exhibition Month at Mapleton Expeditionary School of the Arts (MESA) in Thornton, Colorado. In his speech following the exhibition, he said, "We also need to realize that we can meet high standards without forcing teachers and students to spend most of the year preparing for a single, high-stakes test.... But we need to look no further than MESA to see that accountability does not need to come at the expense of a well-rounded education. It can help complete it—and it should."

The effectiveness of the National Exhibition Month campaign owes much to local efforts that came before. The New York Performance Standards Consortium's work to obtain a waiver from New York State's high stakes Regents exam showed the effect that schools can have not only on state policy but on educating a national audience about critical issues.

While exhibitions are a wonderful occasion to invite the community into your school, classroom visits can be effective, too. For most adults, their experience in school was largely confined to the "sage on the stage," a teacher lecturing in front of neatly arranged rows of students at their desks. Look at any Hollywood movie with a depiction of a classroom and you will see what a stranglehold this iconic image of schools has on our collective psyche. Now imagine the impact on a visitor, no doubt haunted by memories of their own "boring" classes, to a classroom where highly animated students are deeply engaged in tasks they and the visitor find relevant.

Recently, Greenville Technical Charter School, a CES Small Schools Network Mentor school, was one of several schools that ran demonstration classrooms for some 300 North Carolina opinion leaders. The setting was a conference on redesigning high schools and came about because a group of non-educators had seen demonstrations of student-centered learning and concluded that it was important for leaders from all sectors in the state to have this experience in order for them to understand the need not merely to "fix" high school, but to transform it. Day-long school visits that are annually part of CES's Fall Forum create additional opportunities for schools to open their doors to interested visitors in ways that contextualize and allow feedback, reflection, and increased understanding.

Such school visits and study tours have had major impact, galvanizing non-educators to envision transformed schools in their communities. Stories of such efforts to mobilize community support to enact significant policy changes necessary to create the climates in which Essential schools can thrive are cornerstones of the CES network's recent achievements. "Oakland's Community Propels Change for Equity," published in Horace's Summer 2002 edition and "The Belmont Zone of Choice: Community-Driven Action for School Change," featured in the Winter 2007 edition of Horace, describe communities that organized for personalized and equitable educational opportunities for students who were poorly served by their districts.

In this issue, you will read about schools that empower their students to be change agents. The Forum for Education and Democracy's George Wood regards 2001's No Child Left Behind legislation with wary and wiser hindsight and offers key questions for educators aiming to influence public policy. Other contributors share the ways curriculum and skill development can empower students, including Southside Family Charter School's twenty-year track record of developing student activists for social justice. And Dan Hoffman and Marcy Raymond share their experiences with the way Metro High School is shaping Ohio's policy and public discourse on schools.

I hope these inspiring stories, along with the others contained here, will spur you to take action in your own work. This is a time of great change. It is no time to compromise what is right for our children.

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## **Resources for Influencing the Discourse from CES**

### **CES School Study Tour, Greater Boston Area February 9-11, 2009**

Do you want the opportunity to see for yourself? CES National is offering a school study tour of several exemplary CES small schools located in the greater Boston area. The tour is open to educators, parents, students, and anyone interested in experiencing Essential schools in action. The CES School Study Tour begins in Boston, the birthplace of the Boston Pilot Schools, and includes visits to CES small schools. You will gain new insight into CES best practices and take back tools and skills to share with your own schools. The

Boston Arts Academy, Fenway High School, Francis Parker Charter Essential School, The Met, Peace Street Campus in Providence, Rhode Island, Samuel Mason Elementary, and Mission Hill Elementary are among the schools confirmed for the tour. For more information, please visit:

[www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/ssp/p\\_d/winter09.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/ssp/p_d/winter09.html).

### **CES ChangeLab**

Through school tours, discussion boards, and "Ask a Mentor" panels, CES ChangeLab expands the reach of the physical Mentor schools to the larger CES and educational communities. Take a behind-the-scenes look and see how these thirteen Mentor Schools exemplify CES principles in action.

[www.ceschangelab.org](http://www.ceschangelab.org)

### **National Exhibition Month**

National Exhibition Month, a nationwide campaign that occurs every May, highlights and promotes exhibitions as a more effective and comprehensive way of assessing student performance than standardized paper and pencil tests. In 2008, close to 100 schools and organizations across 25 states participated, recognizing and documenting student exhibitions, submitting letters to the editors of local papers, hosting public events to showcase exhibitions, and educating media and local leaders about the benefits of exhibitions.

[www.essentialschools.org/exhibitions.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/exhibitions.html)

### **Related Resource**

"Making the Pendulum Swing: Challenging Bad Education Policy in New York State" is part of *Horace's* Fall 2005 edition, Volume 21, Number 4. The entire issue, "Using Advocacy and Communication to Create and Sustain Essential Schools," is a valuable resource for Essential school educators and others seeking to improve communication and advocacy skills toward the goal of influencing politics and policy to create better conditions for students, schools, and their communities to thrive.

[www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/resources/horace/21\\_4/21\\_4\\_toc.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/resources/horace/21_4/21_4_toc.html)

To read "Oakland's Community Propels Change for Equity," featured in *Horace* Volume 18, Number 4, Summer 2002, visit:

[www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces\\_res/267](http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/267).

For "The Belmont Zone of Choice: Community-Driven Action for School Change," *Horace* volume 23, Number 4, visit:

[www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces\\_res/421](http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/421).

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