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In the Company of Teachers

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Author(s): [George Wood](#)

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Every one of us in the Coalition remembers the first time we met Ted Sizer. For me, it was at a small meeting of teachers in Georgia where Ted had shown up to see what they were doing in their classrooms. As usual, Ted stayed in the background, yielding the floor to, as he would say, “The people doing the real work.” Even though he was the guest of honor, recognized by everyone in the room as the leader of the school restructuring movement, he wanted nothing more than to be in the company of good teachers.

Being in the company of teachers is at the heart of the Coalition. Ted liked to call our annual meeting a gathering of old friends. And he was, simply, everyone’s best friend.

The center of his work, of his life, of our CES, is the life of the teacher. *Horace’s Compromise*, the first of his well known series about teachers and school change, imparted a sympathetic portrait of Horace Smith, a teacher trying to make a difference in a system designed for control rather than learning. Rather than fault Horace for his many shortcomings, Ted ached for him and the compromises he made to get through the school day while keeping his sanity and teaching a few children. Ted wanted for Horace a school, what was to be Horace’s School, where teachers practiced their craft in the service of helping young people to use their minds well.

The Coalition was Ted’s, and now our, attempt to launch, nurture, and protect schools where all of us “Horaces” could do our best work. He knew we needed each other, and we knew we needed him. And we have thrived for 25 years.

It has been a quarter century where we have seen our influence wax and wane. Early on, CES was a major force in the rethinking of school culture and organization. Across the country, schools were redesigned in the name of students doing authentic work in engaging classrooms. The Annenberg Challenge, the Re:Learning Project, and so many other initiatives bore the stamp of CES. In many states, CES was the major reform strategy; in fact, Federal Hocking High School, where I am principal, received state funds to put the CES principles to work.

In the name of standardized testing, the so-called accountability agenda of the late 1990s, which was followed by NCLB, pressured many champions of CES’s structures to compromise. While our influence continued through our work of creating small schools, there is no doubt that the pressure to teach to the tests to avoid the punitive nature of federal and state legislation has caused our numbers to shrink. In the name of “accountability” and “data driven” reform, our agenda of whole school culture change took a back seat.

Of course, as we knew would be the case, these agendas have failed. When schools are only accountable for standardized test scores, too much else is shoved out of the door—including the arts, project based learning, portfolios, performance assessments, and, dare we say it, the joy of teaching and learning. So-called data-driven reforms are only about one type of data; while we have reams of paper and reports on test scores, we still don’t know much about student success.

But Ted, ever the optimist, launched a counter-offensive in the face of this turn of events. Along with several other leaders in the CES movement, he created a policy advocacy shop, The Forum for Education and Democracy. Ted saw The Forum as a sister organization for CES, one that would press for policies that supported the practices CES teachers carried out. He knew the pendulum would swing again, and with the election of a new federal administration, he wanted to make sure we would be ready.

As we enter our next 25 years, we are confronted with a great opportunity. The last decade of standards and

testing has not worked. The standards in most states are, as Ted told us about the high school 30 years ago, a mile wide and an inch deep. And the tests we rely upon are simply warmed-over measures of rote learning that have not been correlated to anything beyond the ability to past tests.

In this context, there are some promising signs. As our policy makers have begun to look for different answers, they have seen that in many other nations' teachers are more valued, students work at real projects, assessments are performance-based, and student supports are in place. Additionally, they have not let their schools be funded unequally. It is almost as if the CES agenda has been embraced more wholeheartedly elsewhere, and now we want to catch up.

When Ted Sizer started CES, he could not have imagined how many lives he would change. Teachers have become more empowered and taken more control of their craft. Students have found themselves more engaged in genuine learning tasks and leave school more than ready for college, careers, and citizenship. And some communities have experienced a renaissance in their local schools. We have Ted and CES to thank for this, and more.

Now the task is to reclaim our legacy of genuine school restructuring and speak loudly on our local, state, and national stages for schools that are equitable, engaging, and challenging. Ted spoke for us those many years ago when he turned his dream—of a network of schools into the reality of CES and all that has resulted. We can now speak for Ted and his legacy as we use the current policy debates to turn our dream of schools that focus on all children learning to use their minds well in order to ensure a democratic and just future for our nation—into our reality.

Federal Hocking High School (FHHS) is located in the Appalachian foothills of southeastern Ohio with approximately 450 students in grades nine through 12. Since 1992, FHHS has been a dramatically restructured high school. The daily schedule includes class periods of 80 minutes each, allowing students to go into greater depth and detail in their studies. The school's advisory system allows one teacher to follow a small group of students (usually fewer than 15) from grades ten through 12. Advisors supervise seniors as they design and carry out their senior project, which includes the use of community learning resources. FHHS offers a core curriculum for all students with many courses taught in an interdisciplinary manner and an extensive internship program. Finally, all students produce and defend a graduation portfolio, which contains examples of their best work. FHHS is a Mentor School in the CES Small Schools Network.

The Forum for Education and Democracy is a national education "action tank" committed to the public, democratic role of public education: the preparation of engaged and thoughtful democratic citizens. The Forum's conveners and supporters work to promote a public education system worthy of a democracy, characterized by strong public schools, equity of educational resources, and an informed, involved citizenry.

George Wood is in his 18th year as principal at Federal Hocking High School, a CES member school since 1995. He is also the Executive Director of the Forum for Education and Democracy. He has written several books on school change inspired by the work of teachers in CES schools including *Schools that Work* and *A Time To Learn*. His wife, Marcia, teaches kindergarten and his sons Michael (Earlham College, 2005) and John (Warren Wilson College, 2009) both attended Federal Hocking.

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