

[Home](#) > [Resources](#)

Always There

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Everybody seems to have a short memory, which is why we keep making mistakes in this country. This is supposed to be why we study history. The history of the education reform movement from the 1960s through the 1990s seems to elude 21st century attempts at reform—tremendously sad, because there is so much to learn from the successes and failures of the time. Ted Sizer (actually a historian by training) was the main reformer of that era. His books (the “Horace trilogy” and others), his television appearances, his Congressional testimonials in Washington, the way he sold ideas to big corporations—all guided by his pursuit for better high schools—led us all. The beauty was that Ted could relate to everybody, the high school students and the college presidents, the teachers and the founders, the principals and the legislators.

Ted simplified his work to nine (and then 10) principles that everyone could understand, though not everyone could figure out how to use in schools. Mostly, they were about putting the students first, about understanding the power of student as worker.

Ted went one step further than everyone else. He did the Study of High Schools. He wrote “Horace’s Compromise,” very readable and very powerful. But he didn’t stop there. He started an organization, the Coalition of Essential Schools, to support schools actually doing the work. I was lucky—when I was its principal, Thayer High School was chosen as one of the first four CES schools.

At that time, the Coalition was the major movement to create meaningful, effective schools experiences for all kids. It became an impetus for other reform movements, all based on many of Ted’s principles. Ted gave us a language that was matched with practice. The words exhibition, advisory, and portfolios all became part of the language. The new reformers probably don’t even know where the terms came from. Ted continues today, showing up at meetings, telling his stories, supporting everyone.

He would go where we needed him. He would drive his old car (that today would have made him eligible for the Cash for Clunkers program) up to my little school in New Hampshire or fly to California to talk to a superintendent. Over 20 years ago, he testified in a school gymnasium as a school board was firing me and dropping the Coalition. Last month, Ted and Nancy drove to Providence to participate in a gathering of reformers working on influencing the next iteration of No Child Left Behind.

He is always there. Just recently, I sat at his house talking about education as his friends from around the country called to say hello and check in on his health. It was a beautiful day to be at the feet of my mentor, a great man who continues to influence us all.

Young reformers: know Ted Sizer. He is a giant. His footprint is on everything we do today.

Dennis Littky is the co-founder and co-director of Big Picture Learning and the Met Center in Providence. He is nationally known for his extensive work in secondary education in urban, suburban, and rural settings, spanning over 40 years. His focus now is expanding the Big Picture Learning design to include college-level accreditation through College Unbound, where students have the opportunity to earn a bachelor’s degree and advanced certifications through a challenging, real-world based, and entrepreneurial course of study.

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