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Ted, Expecting Us

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In a roomful of people, Ted Sizer always went right to the kids. I have seen it countless times: With merry eyes and delighted smile, he would adjust his tall frame so he could speak directly with the young one. And then he would ask just the right question about what this interesting person was thinking and doing. You could tell that the conversation engaged Ted completely. You could see that he was bringing out the best, both personally and intellectually, in the young person who was talking to him.

From our first encounter 37 years ago, he always gave me that same unconditional belief that I could learn and grow. When I was just out of college, my young family moved into the Sizers' house in the deep woods of Harvard, Massachusetts, where we launched the town newspaper from their kitchen counter during the nine years that Ted was headmaster at Phillips Andover. In 1989, when I was a young journalist with scant knowledge of education, he trusted me to tell the stories of the growing Coalition of Essential Schools, in *Horace*. And then, in 1993, he and Nancy agreed to join a small group of us in starting an Essential School called Parker, on a closing-down military base nearby. I can truthfully say that I was completely unprepared for all three of those bold undertakings. Yet Ted, serene and supportive, never let on that any of them might fail.

That quality of "unassuming expectation" illuminated every action that I saw Ted Sizer take, during the 25 years he guided the Coalition of Essential Schools on its brave and often perilous mission. The CES Common Principle that describes "a tone of decency and trust" captures this quality as a value that must infuse a school if students are to learn to use their minds well. But you could also see Ted's unassuming expectation as he sat listening to teachers puzzle over what material they could give up, in order for students to understand more deeply. You could see it as he nudged district administrators to rethink traditional school structures so that teachers could know every student well. You could see it when he put the weight of his formidable reputation behind the Coalition's visionary upstarts who imagined schooling in completely different forms.

Every year in early November, when Ted opened our Fall Forum, he would pause for a moment with reading glasses in hand, and look out at all of us who gathered there for courage and inspiration. He had started the Coalition in 1984 as "a conversation among friends," and he would keep each of us in that conversation even when many thousands of educators and youth and parents and policymakers came to share it. It kept us going, that expectation of his: We could do what we set out to do, if we did it together. The work of Essential Schools belonged to all of us.

Throughout these past 25 years, our Coalition has encountered constant challenge in that work. We struggled to collaborate in just and democratic ways as our variegated movement broadened and grew unwieldy. We clung to our principles, despite wrenching switchbacks in state and national policies affecting children and schools. We pushed against an entrenched system in which the children of families with money had ever-greater opportunities than those who went without.

Ted was our constant coach during that era of conflict and change—sometimes in our schools and centers, sometimes in the national forum, often in quiet conference with those who held keys to doors we could not open on our own. His lucid words, which changed the way people all over the world now think and speak of school, cut through the rhetoric of "reform" and trained our gaze acutely on the students at the center. What are these interesting young people doing, what are they thinking, what can we learn from each other? I can see him now, belief and expectation lighting his face as he went right to the kids in the room, to commence another conversation that could change the world.

Visit the Essential Schools website, www.essentialschools.org, to read *Horace* edited by Kathleen Cushman from 1989 to 2001.

Kathleen Cushman wrote and edited *Horace* from 1989 to 2001. A co-founder of the nonprofit WKCD (www.whatkidscando.org), she lives in New York City, writing books with adolescents about their lives and learning.

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