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Beyond Reform: Transformation

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“Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one person can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills, misery, ignorance, and violence. Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events. And in the total of all those acts will be written the history of a generation.”

– Robert F. Kennedy

The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) is not a reform movement. To reform is to make a thing again; reformation implies a stasis that doesn’t deliver enough for our educational future. This issue of *Horace* demonstrates that Essential schools and the districts and networks that support them are at various points in the journey of transformation, the process of creation that irrevocably moves teaching and learning within schools and school systems, over, through, or beyond to somewhere entirely different. The schools and systems described in these pages have moved from teacher-centered to learner-centered, from disengagement to connection, from isolation to cooperation, from inequitable exclusivity for many to inclusive opportunity for all.

CES stands for the principle that real transformation is driven by the belief that public schools – and all of their associated civic, business, and other institutions – exist so all people can reach their fullest potential. This commitment to democracy and to the value of every one of us demands radical transformation in the truest sense of the word. This issue of *Horace* provides first-hand accounts from writers within the CES network that reframe and redefine transformation; the perspectives in these pages not only provide evidence of system-wide change, but they restore our faith in “transformation.” And this issue highlights specific CES network strengths, such as sustained coaching within schools as described by Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools Co-director Shug Brandell in her look at the ways two Jackson, Michigan elementary schools have developed student-focused pedagogy, adult learning communities, and shared leadership.

Creating the Conditions for Everyone to Thrive

Seventeen year old Seattleite Donna Dockter was a “going nowhere” student. Now she is an accomplished young woman: a leader, public speaker, school designer, educator, and confident learner. While she gives generous and deserved credit to the learning community at her high school, SeaTac, Washington’s Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment (ACE), the work of personal change is Donna’s own achievement. One of the three new small Essential schools that resulted from the successful conversion of Tyee High School (the other schools are Global Connections High School, and Odyssey-The Essential School), ACE created the conditions for Donna to inhabit her best self, just as the Highline School District created the conditions for ACE to emerge.

Read on for Donna’s words and to learn more about ACE from Carrie Howell, a founding teacher. Their stories deliver powerful evidence that when relationships, schools, school systems, and related policy environments are guided by the CES’ Common Principles, all young people will have equitable and personalized access to educational experiences that prepare them to inhabit and realize the potential of their best selves. When we talk about transformation, this is the sort of result that we envision.

But, of course, as a result of No Child Left Behind’s array of damaging effects, we are raising a generation of children in the midst of radical educational transformation that, while ostensibly aimed at improving learning and achievement, is exacerbating inequalities and creating worse conditions for all. CES network educators agree with the goals of improved instruction and outcomes. We will not leave a single child behind. But we emphatically insist that our strategies and tactics for doing so differ greatly from those demanded by current

federal and state policies. The essence of CES-driven educational transformation unites access to a meaningful, powerful education for every child with values that align with the Common Principles: local decision-making; educators, students, and community members as active change agents; community connections; emphasis on depth; shared leadership; relevant learning driven by students' passions; professional learning communities; democratic practices; and structures that cultivate demonstrations of mastery.

Without Transformation, We All Suffer

All of us come to this work with urgency, of course, and just as every Essential school is different from every other, the reasons we do this work differ. Nevertheless, we share responsibility for and collectively suffer from the effects of what's not working well, some of which can be demonstrated statistically. One example: the National Center on Education Statistics reports that in 2005, more than 9.4 percent of 16- to 24-year olds in the United States were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. The dropout problem is most acute among African American, Latino, Native American, and economically challenged students, many of whom reside in our urban areas.

Just by this one measure, we can see that for far too many young people (three and a half million!), schools aren't working. As disagreement about the proper ways to address that dysfunction persists, we suffer. Even if we have found our own ways in the world and have dedicated our professional lives to making that true for others, when millions don't finish high school each year, when overemphasis on testing turns the light off in the minds of millions more, we all suffer. LaShawn Routé Chatmon, head of the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, argues this point resolutely in this issue, making us understand the urgency for the small school transformations taking place in Oakland, California and surrounding communities.

Civil and human right activist Ella Baker is known for saying, "One of the things that has to be faced is the process of waiting to change the system, how much we have got to do to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going." Galvanizing demand for change comes from looking at current conditions straight on; if we cannot understand the problems we face, we cannot begin to understand possible solutions. At the same time, urgency for many Essential school educators comes not only from shielding the young people we work with from the worst, but from creating conditions where they can experience the best. We are driven to make real the vision of a fully engaged citizenry, of an economy running at full power, of widespread prosperity, of increased peace and cooperation. This vision of a better future, as well as reaction to unacceptable current school and school system conditions, led to the creation of the Belmont Zone of Choice, a collaboration of municipal officials, adult and youth community members, teachers unions, and district personnel in Los Angeles that has produced the conditions for transformed schools for a chronically underserved community, described here by former Center for Collaborative Education staffer Jeremy Nesoff.

Shifting the Unit of Change from Schools to Systems

Descriptions and analyses of change within systems and networks – rather than inside the walls of separate schools or behind the doors of individual classroom – connects all of the writing in this issue and characterizes the transformed practice of CES itself. Through the Small Schools Network and the "communities of practice," to use 2006 Fall Forum keynote speaker Margaret Wheatley's phrase, that define the CES Affiliate Centers, CES National has shifted its own focus from schools as the unit of change to school systems and networks. Building on strengths in the evolution of personalized, equitable, and academically powerful teaching and learning for all members of school communities, CES is working for policies and other conditions to ensure the continued support for and success of such schools. In this issue, CES Northwest's Rick Lear, Brinton Ramsey, and Catherine Wallach's "Searching for Coherence" addresses that challenge, describes the work of developing such contexts in Washington state. They describe collaborating at the district level to help administrators resist the allure of standardization and build the capacity required for differentiation in order to support portfolios of small, personalized high schools and district-wide professional learning communities.

We Are Creating What Happens Next

Transforming schools is an emotional and intellectual endeavor that allows people with a strong sense of social justice to do the hard thinking and critical analysis necessary to change systems. The stories in this issue are one element in wider cycles of inquiry CES is leading that are dedicated to understanding how to

create the twenty-first century-ready education system that this generation – and future generations – of young people not only deserve but demand. This multilayered inquiry, happening in many places and led by many people, possesses the qualities of a network into which everyone is invited and where everyone matters. It is rich with information, informed by multiple perspectives, inclusive, and democratic. And it is, sometimes, frustratingly diffuse, conflicted, and unwieldy. That duality characterizes CES as an emerging twenty-first century organization.

And it also keeps us connected to our past. When CES began, Ted Sizer described our collective work as a conversation among friends, and that is what continues to identify us. We are many thousands of real friends, in pursuit of common goals, committed to working through disagreements, eager to learn from one another, willing to find common ground, and dedicated to learn from each other's differences.

People who ferociously insist on making a vision real and minutely tend to its development are the engines of societal change. So believe this: one day, we will find 3,000-student schools, disengaged students, and indifferent communities unimaginable and intolerable. One day, teachers in all schools will be treated respectfully and professionally, able to contribute their strengths, learn, grow, and improve their practice as fulfilled lifelong educators. And one day, factory schools that treat young people and the adults that work with them like interchangeable parts will be extinct. Though sometimes it can be hard to visualize through the smog and din of daily work in schools, we are doing world-changing work at what Stephanie Pace Marshall describes as "the right moment" for transformation.

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