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Ted Sizer's Opening Remarks, Fall Forum 2000, Providence, Rhode Island

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Note from the editor: Most Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forums have opened with remarks from CES's founder, Ted Size. Ted's observations reconnected us with our purpose and reminded us that our network is unique, precious, practical, and immeasurably valuable. The thought that Ted shared to launch Fall Forum in 2000, which took place in Providence, Rhode Island, stand as a powerful example and appear below.

It is well for all of us, even those of us who've been at it for some time, to review what the Coalition of Essential Schools is, and what it is not. CES is not a fixed school design. You can't buy a blueprint, put it up on the wall, and build from those specific dimensions. It is rather, a set of ideas, ideas and conditions and convictions. We call them principles, which, on the basis of substantial experience and research, strike many of us as an essential part of life in a worthy school. It's ideas, not specific practices, which drive your and my work.

And precisely how those principles play out in practice will necessarily and happily vary from place to place. And in any one place, the practical expression of those principles will play out over time. Like all human gatherings, a school is in constant motion. Who is there, and why they are there, and the moment in time in which they are gathered, affect the community. We not only accommodate this diversity, we revel in it, because people and places, God bless us, differ. And thank goodness that they do. The trick for all of us is to gather the particular genius of each place at a given moment in time to provide concrete experience, around which our principles work. Context counts, and real authority over that context, your and my ability to have authority in our place, our students, even the youngest among them, having authority for their own place, is an elixir and a provocation for the deepest and most rewarding kind of learning.

Now saying this doesn't mean that you and I are just kind of "fuzzy wuzzies," and that these ideas which we share, to change the metaphor into a rather grim one, have teeth. That is, if we take these ideas seriously, we have to do some serious things. Serious in a sense that many of the ideas that you and I have come to respect, fly in the face, when they are put into practice, of much of the traditional American school—public and private, elementary and secondary alike.

Let me just mention three of the most familiar examples. "I cannot teach a child well, whom I do not know well. How can I teach that child well, if I do not know her enthusiasms or why she makes mistakes or what seems to be out of sorts for her at a given moment, or what is behind her at home. And no two of our children are alike. And so the question for all of us is: how many children can I get to know well enough to know them and their families and their situations well at once? And you and I struggle in high schools to get that number to no more than 80, knowing full well that in many schools it is routinely 120 to 150. And, by in large, the lower the income of the students, the larger the load you and I are asked to cover. I think most of us, if we were rewriting those principles, at the high school level, would say 50 to 1. Fifty kids for the whole year, not 50 who are rescheduled in the middle of the year. Fifty, you can really get to know 50 well. And in an elementary school, 20 on the outside, but it really should be 12 to 15.

There is no one way to achieve this in the real world. No two schools will adopt the same strategy. Many people say, "Oh that's a pipe dream. How are you going to run a high school with those kinds of faculty/student ratios without changing the budget?" It can be done if the school wants to. It's a matter of revising the budget of time and the budget of money. And this involves making tough decisions about what is more and less important. What we've learned since that Fall Forum in 1987 is that it can be done. It can be done in the cities. It can be done in the suburbs. It can be done in rural areas. It can be done in public schools and private schools. This is not a kind of fantasy. If you really believe that your teachers cannot

teach well children that they do not know, you find a way.

Take another idea, which is related to the first—the familiar cliché “less is more.” Let us do a few things exceedingly well, rather than many things superficially. The child will not use his mind well, will not learn the subtleties as well as the obviousnesses of ideas if he is rushed over those ideas quickly and, if he drops his pencil, he misses a whole century of European history.

What is “less” is the school’s decision. In the Parker School where Nancy and I have worked recently, we made the decision that every student in that secondary school would learn a foreign language, as long as it was Spanish. It’s not that we would not like to offer Japanese, or Russian, or German, or Latin, or Greek. Wonderful. But our budget would not allow for it and still make it possible for none of our teachers to have more than some 60 youngsters whose minds they had to get to know well, and for most of them fewer than that. This “less is more” involves the politics of subtraction, the most difficult politics. Because you have to say we can’t do this in order to do that well. And we’ve learned since 1987 that it can be done.

It ain’t easy, but it can be done.

And finally, we say that students should be able both to display their knowledge, and also to use it, ideally use it in an unfamiliar situation. The real test for a student is when she is presented with something, which is unfamiliar and asked to use what she has learned and the habits of hard thinking to make sense of it. That is, to make the unfamiliar familiar. And if we hold this as the standard—the ability to display the habit of using one’s knowledge and one’s mind to make sense of the unfamiliar, to give meaning to what may initially appear to be meaningless—you have to show it to us. And we have to ask you about it, and you have to show us again, and we have to see you do it. And that’s serious learning, very serious learning. It’s very easy, indeed criminally cheap, to reduce learning to any kind of one-shot performance. Whether it’s a standardized test, or an essay, or one 10-minute prepared speech. Our function is ultimately about our students’ habits. What we really care about, the ultimate assessment of your and my work, is what those young people do when we’re not looking. And how you build that objective in a practical sense into the life of a school, with all its chaos and noisiness and peanut butter sandwiches, which drop in the middle of a hall and somebody steps on it, all of that. How you build that in is very much a function of who you are and where you are. You can’t mass-produce the ways and means of encouraging our young people to use their minds powerfully over ideas and things and artifacts and arts, which are worth spending time on.

Every school should be a decent and thoughtful and safe place. Indeed, each school should be a moral place. What this means and how it is achieved is up to those of us in the community of the school: the young people, their families, the staff, the community around it. These are things that you and I care about. These are things that are hard to measure. These are things that are even hard to describe, because they’re complex, and they are rooted deeply into the humanity that we all share.

And so we have these Fall Forums. Or, as a former Latin scholar, I should say, Fall Fora. And what we do here, as those of you who have been to these before know, is to provide a blizzard of examples of promising practices in schools that share common principles. It’s not that what you and I will see being shared by colleagues in other schools is how we’ll approach this problem. It’s not that we’re going to copy it. It’s that we are going to be provoked by it. We’re going to say, “That’s interesting; they put a different spin on this. I bet we can take something like that spin and craft something that will improve what we’re doing.” The whole point is that we are learning from one another.

A sentimental way of describing a Fall Forum, or of the Coalition as a whole for that matter, is a conversation among friends. We are teaching each other—every one of us. Every student here, every teacher here, every superintendent and principal here, we’re all learning from one another. And the extent to which this gathering will be a success is the extent to which all of us approach this as a collective endeavor, where each of us is student and each of us is teacher. And let me repeat that our convictions and these principles have clear pedagogical merit. They work. If they are taken seriously, if we do engage with the terribly difficult politics of subtraction, if we make sure that we think hard about each youngster, if we ask enough of that youngster, it works.

But there also is a moral part of this that is of a different order. A school is not, and should not ever be, a faceless factory where the young people are herded about by teachers, engaged in crowd control, and

organized largely by their age. "I'm 14 therefore I'm in grade X. I'm 18 therefore I'm in grade Y." A school cannot be a factory where the adults do not know their kids. Every child deserves to be known well. Every child deserves to have her or his specialnesses recognized and respected. No two of them are alike. No two of them are inspired by precisely the same thing. Every teacher, likewise, deserves the respect of substantial autonomy within an honest and supportive community. You and I deserve the same kind of respect that our children do, if not in quite the same way. We are not mere delivery machines programmed to provide certain things on the table in front of each child.

Every student's mind should be stretched. Every student's values should be tested, tested in the sense of confronted at the appropriate time. Every student, without exception, should be able to succeed well at something consequential. And our job is to make sure that every student, without exception, has that jolt of self-discovery and confidence that emerges from doing something of obvious importance exceedingly well. And from that, moving forward to achieving across the board very well. Every school should be a decent, thoughtful, and worthy place. We are in the humanity business. We're dealing with ideas and children's minds. Our schools should be described and represented by principles and ideas, and how those ideas and principles play out practically is for those of us close to our own youngsters to shape.

For additional Fall Forum remarks from Ted Sizer and others, please visit CES's website, www.essentialschools.org.

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