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## Loud and Clear

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It's been over 25 years since I first I ran across Ted Sizer's name. Harvard and Andover? Not in my "set." Despite those affiliations, some friends of mine said I shouldn't write him off, and my reverse snobbery was permanently disarmed when I read a piece he wrote for Education Week. My heart sang. Here was someone talking about secondary education the way I tried to communicate about elementary schools—only with more clarity. I started slow, and approached him gingerly, making contact through a friend of a friend. "Tell her to call me," he told my friend. So I did, and within a year, we had opened the doors of Central Park East Secondary School. As its principal, my life was made more complicated. I tried to stick to Ted's motto to keep as much as possible simple, so that the heart of education—the subject matter—can remain complex.

At the start, it was so important to have the opportunity to work closely with Ted. He was so essentially a "schoolman," a Mr. Chips figure with all the romance that surrounded that image. Accustomed to models of brute power, parents, teachers, bureaucrats, and even politicians were attracted to his message of common decency. There's a way of talking about, and to, school people that has become so commonplace that we've grown indifferent to the callous treatment. Ted was always at the other end of the spectrum, reminding us of what attracted us to become teachers to start with.

For the following decade, the Coalition of Essential Schools, Central Park East Secondary School, and Ted and Nancy Sizer were central to my life. Ted's work—his words on paper and in person—infused my own. His soft-spoken, slightly laid-back New England quality, his amazingly subtle put-downs—always with a smile—and his careful listening expanded my repertoire. Ted was 100 percent reliable, something too many of the Important People I knew were not. And he wanted stories about real students, their teachers, what they said and did and thought.

Whenever we needed him—to talk with a powerful city official or a potentially ally—Ted was there, bridging gaps. While we rushed off with our proposals and problems, he sat back to take things in. Then, when he entered the discourse, the conversation shifted.

His definition of our task was so Ted-like. When asked, "What do you hope to accomplish over the next decade," he responded, "I hope we can change the conversation about young people and their schools." In his way, he thought of school itself as a form of extended, enriched, and deepened conversation between friends. That perfectly matched my view of kindergarten, even if the medium that we conversed "over" in that setting was the sand table, the block corner, the animal cage, or a favorite book, song, or word play.

Ted's voice has been hampered for too long by his health, but his words are everywhere. Sometime they have been corrupted and co-opted. An example: performance assessment now refers narrowly to an element of standardized test performance. But there is no way to distort the consistent, insistent point of view that runs through all of Ted's books, which we must be sure get into the hands of everyone who missed or forgot them. As we look at our work in school, we must keep Ted's voice loud and clear.

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For more from Deborah Meier about her history with CES and the schools she founded, read "How Much Is Learned When We're Not Looking: The Promise of CES Elementary Schools," available online at [www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces\\_res/431](http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/431).

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