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How Changing a Life Can Help Change Schools

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Changing lives, changing schools, indeed—any impact I have had on changing schools in any way is because Ted and Nancy Sizer changed my life and growth as an educator. In the summer of 1986, I was living temporarily in New York City and thinking about the ways that the big, traditional high school I was working at outside of Boston made me feel like Horace Smith, the “protagonist” of Ted Sizer’s *Horace’s Compromise*. I was itching for change. My summer in New York convinced me that I wanted to move back to New York and teach at a school that was at least trying to work toward progressive reform. I spent the 1986-1987 school year figuring out how I could parlay my dream into reality. As luck would have it, an opening emerged at Bronxville High School (one of the first four CES schools). A phone call to the principal, Judy Coddling, some interviews, and the next thing I knew I was headed back to New York to begin working at a Coalition school.

Things at Bronxville were “messy” (as Ted has always told us they would be), contentious, and alive with discussion about school reform and institutional change. In 1988, I participated in my first Fall Forum in Newport, Rhode Island, a much smaller event than those we’re a part of now. The great moment for me at that Fall Forum was meeting Ted and Nancy Sizer. The calm rationality, genuine humility, and gentle humanity of the Sizers were striking, as was their clear seriousness of purpose and commitment to the task at hand. They made a huge impression on me.

In the years that followed, my work with the Coalition became more and more intense. The Citibank Teaching Fellows, the National School Reform Faculty, and the work with other reform groups like Foxfire and Project Zero became a regular part of my life, as did summers in Providence. Always there, guiding the direction of these projects and endeavors, were Ted and Nancy. The philosophy, embodied by their presence and their actions, was always inspirational.

When Kathleen Cushman told me, at the 1993 Fall Forum in Louisville, that Massachusetts was about to pass a charter school bill and Ted was very interested in getting a real CES School started in their neck of the woods I thought that would be great. Would I be interested in working on it? Of course, I said, but I live in New York. As the project began to become a reality and my interest and involvement increased, I got a phone call from Ted informing me that a teacher education position was open at Brown, and if I were interested in moving closer to Massachusetts, here was the opportunity! Of course, that’s what happened, and the result was the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, of which Ted and Nancy are still the godparents, inspirational leaders, and proud co-creators (not to mention the year they served as co-principals—talk about “boots on the ground!”).

When I wrote a handbook on performance assessment, Ted gladly wrote the extremely kind and flattering foreword. When I would see Ted and Nancy, there was always something new or insightful to be learned. That’s just the way it is with the Sizers. I can’t imagine what my life as an educator would have become without their presence in my development.

When the Brown University Education Department gave Ted a Lifetime Achievement Award at our initial “No Teacher Left Behind” conference in 2007, I introduced Ted. What I said then is something I still believe. When historians of United States progressive education look at the 20th century, there John Dewey is at the beginning and Ted Sizer is at the end. The rest of us fill the space between with our efforts to live up to their vision.

Bil Johnson started substitute teaching in 1971. His association with the Coalition of Essential Schools began

in 1987 and continued in multiple ways in the following years. Johnson was a co-founder the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in 1994; he co-wrote Parker's charter and served as the Lead Teacher in Arts/Humanities when the school opened in 1995-96. Johnson returned to Brown University as a Senior Lecturer and the Director of Social Studies/History Education in the Education Department in 1996-97. In 2001, Johnson was the Founding President of the Board of Directors for Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Johnson moved to the teacher education program at Yale University in 2007. In 2008, he taught at Essex Street Academy, an Essential school on the Lower East Side of NYC. Currently, Johnson teaches history at the Urban Assembly School for Design and Construction on West 50th Street in New York City. Johnson wrote *The Performance Assessment Handbook*, featuring examples of work from teachers in CES schools, and *The Student Centered Classroom Handbook*, which offers examples of Coalition principles in action in the classroom.

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