SMALL SCHOOLS, BIG IDEAS

This guide shows how the principle-based and equity-focused model from the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) can be used to redesign existing schools and create new schools that prepare students for this century’s challenges and opportunities.

Filled with inspirational stories and illustrative examples from schools that have successfully implemented CES principles and practices, Small Schools, Big Ideas offers information and inspiration needed to:

- Transform schools in order to achieve equitable outcomes for all students
- Understand various school design options
- Establish school vision, mission, and goals to raise educational expectations and results
- Develop transformational leadership
- Cultivate a professional learning community
- Implement student-centered teaching, learning, and curricula
- Build productive relationships with families and communities
- Establish strategies for sustainability

These recommendations and proven strategies can help educators transform their schools to become truly equitable, personalized, and academically challenging.

Praise for Small Schools, Big Ideas

“Small Schools, Big Ideas tells the story of the next generation of Essential schools. The authors illustrate the fundamental necessities of putting students at the center, trusting teachers and families, and instilling democratic practices. The Coalition of Essential Schools continues to light the way for schools as places of trust, imagination, and real learning; these principles and ideas that we developed and put into practice a quarter-century ago continue to evolve, and are still the best ways we know to create life-changing teaching and learning.”

— DEBORAH MEIER, Senior Scholar and Adjunct Professor, New York University

“For educators, policymakers, and anyone else working to improve education in America, Small Schools, Big Ideas is a tremendous resource. The authors draw on both research and direct experience to provide a detailed, practical, and inspiring analysis of what must be done to create the schools we need.”

— PEDRO NOGUERA, Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education, New York University

Mara Benitez is senior director of school development for the Coalition of Essential Schools. Jill Davidson is director of publications at CES and also edits its journal, Horace. Laura Flaxman is co-founder and co-principal of ARISE High School, a model school in the CES network. The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) has been at the forefront of creating and sustaining personalized, equitable, and intellectually challenging schools for over twenty-five years.
Praise for Small Schools, Big Ideas: The Essential Guide to Successful School Transformation

“In Small Schools, Big Ideas, authors Benitez, Davidson, and Flaxman help us understand the structural complexities of creating nurturing environments in which all students can use their minds well. They also courageously guide the reader into examining the explosive cultural issues, like systemic racism, and offer an authentic path forward for educators in the trenches to instigate school-wide transformation.”

—Glenn E. Singleton, president and founder, Pacific Educational Group, Inc., and author, Courageous Conversations About Race

“Small Schools, Big Ideas shares the Coalition of Essential Schools’ long track record of redesigning schools so that they are successful and learner-centered. The knowledge that these authors and their colleagues across the country have accumulated over many years and many successful schools inspires us to reconsider what young people, and the schools that serve them, can do with the right conditions and support.”

—Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education and faculty sponsor, School Redesign Network at Stanford University

“This guide will help those who believe all students need to be prepared for post-secondary education to re-imagine high schools and confront all forms of inequity that have existed for far too long.”

—John P. Welch, superintendent, Highline Public Schools District, Washington
“Small Schools, Big Ideas reminds us that small school is neither an adjective nor a noun; it’s an aspiration, a desire. Like democracy, Small Schools embody a vision of what must be: messy work, undertaken through collective participation, spiked with vibrant questions, in a deep and restless community, with strong commitments, fueled by raw vulnerabilities and generations of wisdom. Small Schools, Big Ideas interrupts the white noise of privatization, charters, testing, centralization and Racing to the Top, delicately reminding us of the graceful work and sensual practice of making successful public schools grounded in justice, relationships, and democracy.”

—Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Urban Education, The Graduate Center at the City University of New York

“The authors of Small Schools, Big Ideas do a wonderful job of providing a useful road map for how administrators, practitioners, families, and communities can dream big and work together to improve education through a democratic process. Especially notable is that it presents relationships and student-centered policies and practices as the core elements that hold promise in restoring the public’s faith in public education. This book is a must read for anyone who is committed to a progressive social agenda on how public schools can better serve children and youth who deserve no less. This is an outstanding scholarly achievement.”

—Angela Valenzuela, University of Texas professor in the College of Education and author of Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring
SMALL SCHOOLS,  
BIG IDEAS
SMALL SCHOOLS, BIG IDEAS

The Essential Guide to Successful School Transformation

Mara Benitez
Jill Davidson
Laura Flaxman
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The best communities are built around words—not any old words, but ones that can inspire and galvanize. We say best because these are the communities that last. They did not rise from a temporary problem or a pragmatic accommodation; instead, they came together because people saw in each other a similarity of outlook and a way in which they could help and be helped by each other to accomplish important things.

There are many such communities, but the best-known examples of the words that bind long-standing communities together are the sacred writings of the world’s religions and the Constitution of the United States. More than battles won or an economy shared, the major ideas in the Declaration of Independence and the 1787 Constitution are what have seen a large and diverse nation through tough times. These words remain inspiring to the vast majority of Americans to this day in no small part because of the struggles of many to broaden these ideals in ways more inclusive than the founders could conceive. One of the best ideas in the Constitution, however, was expressed in the carefully constructed amendment process. It said, in essence, “This is what we think and could agree on today, but tomorrow may be different. Don’t change these ideas lightly, but let them evolve slowly, and when most of you are sure that the words in this statement no longer express your highest ideals, then change them to do so.”

It seems immodest, but we in the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) would like to count ourselves among the many communities that have used words and convictions to express their connection. The words in the CES Common Principles were heard first in a variety of schools all over the country as leaders, teachers, and students described what they were doing to make their schools
better. From these educators came the conviction that each child will learn more readily if he or she feels comfortable and known well. Also from them came the idea that a student’s progress in mastering a topic should be measured not by how many weeks were devoted to teaching it but by what actual and important work was done over those weeks. Because each student learns differently and at a different rate, classrooms should be set up to facilitate a variety of learning styles, with respect for all. Our mutual agreement that these CES Common Principles made sense became the core of our colleagueship.

Like the 1787 Constitution’s framers, we have understood that the CES Common Principles would need amendment, reinterpretation, and evolution. Sure enough, after a few years, it seemed wise to make the priority of democracy in school design and equity among students—implied by the original language—more explicit. The principles reflected our actual assumption and work already, but the words could help in furthering it. In addition, over the years, many new practices developed, and more and more, the CES Common Principles came to characterize what we were doing and why we valued our community.

Years ago, we were on a call-in radio program and we got a call from a person who described himself as a “Coalition teacher.” Before he had a chance to ask his question, the moderator asked, “Well, what is a Coalition teacher?” A bit taken aback, the teacher hesitated; we held our breath. Finally, he said, “A Coalition teacher does a lot of professional development.”

The fact is that professional development is not expressly called for in the CES Common Principles. However, the way we teach is unusual; starting with a student’s needs before the state’s rubrics or even the teacher’s lesson plans requires a good deal of thought, conversation, and new ideas. There is no model that is ready to plug in. Though our words guide us, much observation will be needed in order to know what actions are appropriate to take and much more evolving will need to occur before we are content with the kind of learning that we are facilitating in our schools.

Every dynamic institution will grow and change, often in response to demands for social justice. Our schools are such institutions, and so are individuals in the Coalition itself. Teachers and principals will learn from their own analyses of what has worked and what still needs work, but they will also learn from other like-minded people in the Coalition and beyond. The CES Small Schools Project was founded on this idea. Mara Benitez and Laura Flaxman brought wisdom and
experience as CES school leaders to bear as the Small Schools Project emerged as the next chapter of CES's history. As leaders of the CES Small Schools Project, Benitez and Flaxman established the framework and conditions for the emergence of a network of fifty small schools, some veteran and some new, based on the conviction that a commitment to equity joined with the wisdom accrued from exemplary Coalition schools can result in powerful new examples of schools that have the power to change lives. Thus, the original CES Common Principles have been joined by a goodly number of new principles and practices, just as the small number of original colleagues has grown and spread during the past twenty-five years.

Over the years, the publication *Horace* (which since 2001 has been the responsibility of *Small Schools, Big Ideas* author Jill Davidson) has helped to document these changes in our practices and our beliefs. Our tone has always been realistic but hopeful, depending largely on examples. Our message is more inspirational than scholarly, but that's the way we like it. Now, this book draws from that work and from a number of current educators in the field to describe further how some of the old principles have changed, how some new principles have emerged, and how our work inside schools has grown and been improved in response to the challenges that our students currently face.

The best communities are built on words. These are our words at this point in time, and they are carefully chosen by our fascinating, vibrant, hopeful people.

*Harvard, Massachusetts*  
*February 2, 2009*  

Theodore R. Sizer  
Nancy Faust Sizer
Mara Benitez: I am grateful to my baby girl Lulah Divina for inspiring me to do the work of transforming schools. She keeps me focused on changing public education, knowing that one day soon she’ll be attending public schools just like her mommy. I’d like to acknowledge my partner Tahajiye Edwards for being a great parent, cooking great meals, and generally catering to all of my needs during the process of researching and writing this book. Special thanks to my mother-in-law Catherine for taking such good care of my baby. I wouldn’t have had the time or energy to write without her help. Thanks to the mujeres in my circle, who believe in me and the cause. Thanks to the CES staff, especially Brett Bradshaw and Jay Feldman, for their thoughtful and constructive feedback and to Kyle Meador for the excellent job in identifying and organizing the tools, references, and resources in the book. Special gratitude goes out to our executive director Lewis Cohen for holding the vision for this book to happen, believing in us as writers, supporting our crazy schedules, and most important, being an excellent sounding board and editor. I am honored to have had an opportunity to collaborate with my two amazing co-authors. Many thanks to you for your support and wisdom.

Laura Flaxman: I would like to acknowledge my wonderful partners-in-crime on this endeavor, Mara and Jill, for the journey that has led to this book. I definitely would never have been able to do this without you. Lewis Cohen, you made this book possible from start to finish, from creating the space for us to work on it to your eleventh-hour editing. Thank you also to all of the many educators, colleagues, students, and friends who continue to inspire me as an educator and as a human being, many of whom grace the pages of this book. Thanks in particular
to my colleagues, my students, and the families at ARISE, and to my co-founders Romeo Garcia and Emma Paulino. Your goodness, passion, and commitment to the community we serve continue to inspire me and your support keeps me going even on the toughest days. Finally, thank you to my daughters, Ava and Aziza Purser, and my husband, Kenny Purser, for supporting me as I juggled the balls of principal, writer, mother, and partner. And thank you to the rest of my family, both immediate and extended—Andrew, Ruth, Caroline, Gary, Nancy, Connie, Asti—and the many other family members and friends in my life who have had such an influence on who I am and the work I have chosen to do. I love you all.

Jill Davidson: I am deeply grateful for the inspiration of the founders of the Coalition of Essential Schools, especially Ted Sizer, without whom none of what we describe in these pages would have happened. Ted holds a vision of what is possible, and he has created the circumstances for many of us to work toward his vision. My voice joins thousands of others in gratitude. Thanks, too, to Nancy Sizer, for unflagging support, wisdom, encouragement, and great cheer. Deborah Meier has been a source of powerful insight; her public work and private words have deeply shaped my thinking about the purposes of schools and the limitless capabilities of students and educators. Thanks to all of my colleagues at the Coalition of Essential Schools, past and present. Ramon Calhoun deserves kudos for his fantastic, speedy attention to detail. The energy and vision of CES’s executive director, Lewis Cohen, made it possible for us to get this project started, supported us along the way, and helped us move this project the final mile. I am grateful for all that I have learned from my partners in this journey, Mara Benitez and Laura Flaxman; thanks to both of you for your vision, commitment, and persistence. Many thanks to my parents, Marge and Bill Davidson, and my sister, Jennifer Davidson, who contributed her excellent editing skills. My husband, Kevin Eberman, and my sons, Elias Abraham, Leo Maurice, and Henry Theodore, believe in our vision and weathered with grace the many long hours required to articulate it. Thanks, guys!

All of the authors acknowledge the many early CES pioneers: without your contributions, we could and would not be doing this work. Your efforts have improved and transformed many thousands of lives in communities across this country. As well, we acknowledge the current CES network educators who contributed to material in this book. In addition to the dozens quoted
in the text and the hundreds, perhaps thousands more upon whose work the accomplishments documented in these pages have been built, we want to extend special thanks to the following people, who reviewed sections of the text and helped to improve it: Vince Brevetti, Pam Espinosa, Romeo Garcia, David Greenberg, Lisa Hirsch, Misha Lesley, Lisa Karlich, Lawrence Kohn, Ann Mantil, Adelrich McCain, Emma Paulino, Gregory Peters, Beth Silbergeld, Al Solis, and Laura Thomas. We also are grateful for the financial support of the CES Small Schools Project that has been provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
The Coalition of Essential Schools

The Coalition of Essential Schools was founded at Brown University on the Common Principles articulated by Theodore Sizer (1984) in *Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* in order to re-imagine and reorganize high schools. This set of beliefs, considered radical twenty years ago, is now widely accepted by educational scholars as the key to promoting high achievement for students. (See Appendix A for the CES Common Principles.)

Essential schools work to create academic success for every student by sharing decision making with all those affected by the schools and deliberately confronting all forms of inequity. Essential schools focus on helping all students use their mind well through standards-aligned interdisciplinary studies, community-based real-world learning and performance-based assessment. CES schools are places of powerful student learning where all students have the chance to reach their fullest potential. (See Appendix B for an overview of the benefits of the CES approach to education.)

The Coalition sees school transformation as a local phenomenon made real by groups of people working together, building a shared vision, and drawing on the community’s strengths, history, and values. While no two Essential schools are alike, all Essential schools share a commitment to a set of beliefs about the purpose and practice of schooling. As they develop their own programs, schools
take guidance from the CES Common Principles to examine their priorities and design structures and instructional practices that support

• Personalized instruction to address individual needs and interests in which the teachers’ role is to guide students through inquiry
• Small schools and classrooms in which teachers and students know each other well and work in an atmosphere of trust and high expectations
• Multiple assessments based on performance of authentic tasks in an atmosphere of independent learning and intellectual rigor and richness
• Democratic and equitable school policies and practice
• Close community partnerships

Currently, there are hundreds of schools that are affiliated with CES and twenty-six affiliate centers across the country. CES affiliate centers are independent organizations guided by the CES Common Principles that provide long-term coaching, professional development, and technical assistance to schools. CES affiliate centers work with schools and school districts to develop plans for change based on the CES Common Principles. The guidelines for membership vary from center to center and are responsive to the needs of local schools.

CES has documented the accomplishments and challenges of Essential schools through its journal *Horace*, the three-part CES EssentialVisions DVD series, research reports, and other material. For more information about the Coalition of Essential Schools, CES member schools, CES centers, or CES affiliation, please visit http://www.essentialschools.org. For more on the benefits of the CES approach, see Appendix D, “The Benefits of the CES Model.”

**The Small Schools Project and Network**

*Small Schools, Big Ideas: The Essential Guide to Successful School Transformation* focuses on the work of the CES Small Schools Project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Founded in 2003, the CES Small Schools Project is dedicated to creating and supporting small schools throughout the country that are instructionally powerful and sustainable and that offer challenging curricula to students who have been denied a meaningful education. The CES Small Schools Project is committed to effecting broader change within the public education
system and meeting the needs of young people and communities who traditionally and systemically have been underserved—students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Most of the schools are located in urban areas; however, as a whole, the body of schools is diverse, representing various geographic regions and demographics across the United States. The project has also launched CES ChangeLab (http://www.ceschangelab.org), a Web site with behind-the-scenes access to the effective tools and strategies used by CES Mentor Schools.

Through this initiative, CES has built a robust network of over fifty schools that use the CES Common Principles to set priorities and design practices to meet the needs of their students, families, and communities. CES’s national organization has developed a system of CES Mentor Schools, a peer-to-peer model that builds on and codifies the process that successful CES small school have developed over the Coalition’s history. The CES Mentor Schools partner with new small schools that have been created as a result of large high school conversions into autonomous small schools or design teams preparing to open the doors of new schools. Some of these new small schools are charter schools; others are in-district public schools that have been or are being created through explicit agreements with a variety of school districts.

The CES Small Schools Network (CES SSN) is the professional learning community that includes these exemplary CES small schools in various stages of development. Through quarterly meetings (including an intensive weeklong Summer Institute), visits to each other’s schools, and various forms of ongoing informal contact, the CES SSN brings together the best thinkers, practitioners, and innovators in education today to learn from the lessons, challenges, and best practices of their peers. This attention, grooming, and constant inspiration have created an environment that stimulates rapid growth, instills best practices, and supplies the endurance needed to transform our schools and the systems on which they depend. The CES SSN’s process of incubation and support has helped to fortify the new schools, providing their school leaders with a network of experienced leaders who are engaged in a similar mission of starting and transforming schools. The CES SSN not only provides conditions for growth for the design teams and new schools but also provides a lush learning environment for the Mentor Schools that have made a commitment to continuous improvement.
The History of the Coalition of Essential Schools

1984: Theodore R. Sizer, professor of education at Brown University, and several colleagues publish their findings from “A Study of High Schools,” a five-year investigation of teaching, learning, and school history that found that American high schools generally were remarkably similar and simply inadequate. *Horace’s Compromise* describes how the typical structures of schools helped to make these inadequacies all but inevitable. Sizer considers how schools might be designed more wisely and chooses to approach reform not with a new and improved model to be imposed but with a set of ideas, the Common Principles.

1984: Twelve schools in seven states agree to redesign themselves on the basis of Sizer’s ideas and to form the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), based at Brown University.

1993: CES and Brown University receive a generous gift from Ambassador Walter H. Annenberg, part of the Annenberg Challenge, a $500 million gift to support school reform nationwide. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is founded at Brown University.

1994: With hundreds of affiliated schools around the country, the national office of CES helps to arrange the founding of CES affiliate centers, geographically diverse school restructuring support organizations that provide technical support and coaching to schools in order to develop their capacity to demonstrate the CES Common Principles in every aspect of school life.

1997: “Commitment to democracy and equity,” the tenth Common Principle, is added through democratic action at Fall Forum.

1998: Ted Sizer retires as executive director of CES; he has remained involved as chair emeritus of the CES National Executive Board. The CES national organization relocates from Providence, Rhode Island, to Oakland, California.

2003: CES receives a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to form the Small Schools Project, a network of over fifty Mentor Schools and newly formed small schools dedicated to creating and supporting small schools throughout the country that are instructionally powerful and sustainable and that offer challenging curricula to students who have been denied a meaningful education.
2003: With support from the Annenberg Foundation, CES launches the EssentialVisions DVD project to demonstrate CES principles and practices in action.

2004: Debut of CES ChangeLab, an online resource that provides behind-the-scenes access to the best practices of the CES Mentor Schools (http://www.ceschangelab.org).


2006: National Exhibition Month, a nationwide campaign that occurs every May to promote and celebrate exhibitions as a preferred form of student assessment, is founded.


2006: Theodore R. Sizer Dissertation Scholars Grant Program is begun.

2007: Essential Analysis, a resource for supporting data-based inquiry that supports Essential Schools, is opened to the CES network.

2008: CES updates the CES Benchmarks, a tool for teachers, schools, and centers that is designed to address the challenge of helping schools translate the CES Common Principles into practice by describing what the work of the Coalition looks like as they plan their programs and develop ways of assessing their reform efforts. (See Appendix B for the CES Benchmarks.)

2009: CES celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary as a national leader in the reform and restructuring of schools and school systems to make equitable, personalized, and academically challenging schools the norm of American public education. The sixth annual Summer Institute takes place in Providence, Rhode Island. *Small Schools, Big Ideas: The Essential Guide to School Transformation* is published. In New Orleans, Louisiana, CES hosts “Changing Schools, Changing Lives,” its annual Fall Forum, and builds on its strengths to sustain and create programs and services that change our schools and change our world.
THE AUTHORS

Mara Benitez brings twenty years of experience in urban education to her role as senior director of school development for the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). She leads the program design of all CES professional development opportunities and, since 2003, has led the CES Small Schools Project, an initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that started twenty new CES small schools across the country. She leads the CES Small Schools Network, a national professional learning community of over fifty exemplary small schools. Before joining CES, Benitez served as executive director of alternative education for the Oakland Unified School District. As part of her charge, she helped to launch new small schools and programs that serve vulnerable youth. For ten years, Benitez taught humanities at several small schools in New York City and was director of Arturo Schomburg Satellite Academy, a small alternative high school in the South Bronx community where she was raised. She holds a master’s degree in education from Bank Street College of Education and is a graduate of their Principals Institute. She lives with her family in Oakland, California.

Since 2001, Jill Davidson has been the editor of Horace, the quarterly journal of CES’s national organization. As CES’s director of publications, Davidson directs all CES publications and editorial projects and has published work in national journals and publications. Previously, Davidson was an online community producer at various Web sites, directed the Learning Center at the University of San Francisco, and taught high school English and social studies. Davidson is on her second tour of duty with CES; she worked as a CES research assistant after graduating from Brown University. Davidson holds an M.Ed. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She lives with her family in Providence, Rhode
Island, where she is a local community leader and activist for excellent public schools.

Laura Flaxman is co-founder and co-principal of ARISE High School, a new small charter school in Oakland, California. Laura brings twenty years of experience in urban education to her current role. Prior to joining ARISE, Flaxman served as co-director of the Small Schools Project for CES. Flaxman came to Oakland in 2000 to start Life Academy, a new small autonomous public high school, where she served as principal. Flaxman founded and served on the board of the Oakland Small Schools Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and strengthening small public schools in Oakland. Prior to her work in Oakland, Flaxman worked for Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound in New York City, helping to create several new middle schools and to support existing high schools. She completed an internship at Boston Arts Academy, taught at Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn, a residential treatment center in Manhattan, and South Bronx High School. Flaxman holds two master’s degrees: one in educational leadership from Harvard University and the other in English from the Bread Loaf School of English. She earned her B.A. at Wesleyan University.
INTRODUCTION: AN ACADEMICALLY CHALLENGING EDUCATION FOR ALL

Small Schools, Big Ideas: The Essential Guide to Successful School Transformation tells the stories and shares the evidence and lessons of the powerful collective experience of the Coalition of Essential Schools Small Schools Network (CES SSN) as it creates the next generation of Essential schools. In an educational climate dominated by national policy that demands recall and memorization, diminishes critical thinking and problem solving, rewards standardization to the detriment of high academic standards, and sorts schools and students into categories of winners and losers, our first successful generation of CES schools—represented by CES Mentor Schools—has defended against these assaults on personalized, equitable, and academically rich and rigorous education. In these pages, CES Mentor Schools and the new small schools of the CES SSN share the ways they use their challenges and accomplishments to create growth, sustain the strength and number of Essential schools, and create a critical mass.

Far too often, school restructuring initiatives lack vision. Daunted by the enormity of the task, school reformers who want to create better educational options for all children suggest tinkering with nineteenth-century schools instead of creating twenty-first century systems of schools for the post-industrial era. Despite increased high-profile attention at the national and state levels to the quality of American education, many schools and school systems are not able to transform the educational experiences and lives of most young people. Trends that characterize our current school reform era such as the standards movement, No Child Left Behind legislation, and the movement toward privatizing public schools have exacerbated inequities and the achievement gap between white students and students of color. Incidents of school violence abound, and many
students, particularly students of color from low-income backgrounds who are living in urban areas, attend schools at which they continue to be educationally neglected, underserved, and often unsafe. Many researchers have documented and described these conditions, but few solutions create effective change to transform those conditions. We propose and demonstrate that as a product of our twenty-five years of experience in creating student-centered, innovative, high-achieving schools; with an increased capacity to address equity in our work; and with the results of the CES Small Schools Project, CES provides a powerful blueprint for creating the equitable conditions in which a new type of schools designed to produce learners, workers, and citizens ready for the twenty-first century can thrive.

Today’s students must learn how to use their minds well. They must become resilient and persistent, able to complete tasks and work in groups, in order to become citizens who effect change in their communities. With numerous examples of school creation and transformation work in action, successful experiences in a variety of settings, and explanations of effective school practices, Small Schools, Big Ideas contains the largest collection of practical and effective applications of the CES Common Principles (see Appendix A) and related practices that have yet been gathered. For district-level administrators interested in systemic reform, individual educators interested in initiating change, and parents and family and community members seeking guidance on participating in the process of school creation or transformation, this book provides a useful road map. We use data and examples from schools committed to the principles and practices of the Coalition of Essential Schools to demonstrate how locating students firmly at the center of school planning and operations while engaging all education stakeholders in a democratic process can lead to nurturing, effective learning communities capable of producing powerful student achievement results.

Before we discuss the contents of Small Schools, Big Ideas, we offer three notes about what could not be included. First, although small schools are, as the title suggests, a big idea, this book does not comprehensively document the complex terrain of the small schools movement of which CES has been among the leaders. We focus on the schools in the CES Small Schools Network (CES SSN) in these pages, and even with that tight focus, we have not been able to describe and discuss the achievements and challenges of them all. (For a list of the schools and organizations that are referred to in these pages, see Appendix C.) We are painfully aware that we have had to omit powerful lessons from many of the CES
SSN schools, some that are successful and hugely influential and others that are new and growing strong. Second, due to its focus on the CES SSN, this book does not discuss the significant achievements and wisdom of the hundreds of CES affiliate schools or the important coaching, research, and support work of many of the CES affiliate centers. While many of these schools—transformative in their communities and powerful arguments for CES principles and practices—do not grace these pages, we recognize and are grateful for their work. Third, this book focuses primarily on high schools and schools that combine the middle school and high school grades. The CES network is rich with many powerful, exemplary elementary schools, and within our movement, we are inspired by their success and learn vastly from them. However, because the focus of the CES Small Schools Project is the development of new small secondary schools, those schools are the focus of this text and its accompanying Web site (see Additional Resources for School Transformation).

**Additional Resources for School Transformation**

For extensive additional resources on the school transformation practices featured in this book, please visit the *Small Schools, Big Ideas* Web site, which provides extensive tools, resources, curriculum, examples, links to related sources of information and support, and much more that will inspire, inform, and guide school designers as they create personalized, equitable, academically challenging schools and the systems that support and sustain them.

This site also provides wide-ranging links to information about the Coalition of Essential Schools, CES’s network of schools, and the CES affiliate centers—-independent organizations guided by the CES Common Principles that provide long-term coaching, professional development, and technical assistance to schools.

Web site for *Small Schools, Big Ideas: The Essential Guide to Successful School Transformation*:

http://www.ceschangelab.org
Small Schools, Big Ideas contains four sections. Part One describes the distance our school systems need to travel to serve all students well. The first chapter establishes the terms of our argument: changing schools is about changing the lives of individual students, their families, and their communities, as well as the direction of our country. The key elements of transformation are a relentless focus on equity, an understanding of the capacities and qualities that schools designed to effectively educate students for the twenty-first century must possess, small school size, and the power of professional learning communities.

Chapter Two documents the barriers that keep children from an equitable, personalized, and academically vibrant and rigorous education: schools do not adequately prepare all students for the future; an alarming number of students drop out or are pushed out of school; demographics have a devastatingly accurate predictive power over student success; our current national and local policy climates reinforce the status quo in education instead of creating the conditions for success for all; and most school reform proposals address the symptoms of the systemic equity problems that confront us rather than the root causes.

Chapter Three presents the change options for new schools—the ways that new schools can come into existence—and the strategies for creating new schools that will establish them as fundamentally different from the persistent status quo: working within a network dedicated to the principles of equity, utilizing school-to-school learning, employing disruptive innovation, and working with the school district to develop the essential conditions for thriving schools designed to work for all students. This chapter also examines some of the key elements that need to be in place at the district and system level: a balance of autonomy and accountability, control of resources at the school level, policies that promote transformation, leadership that initiates and sustains change, the creation of mass demand for educational equity, and the need to work both from the bottom up and the top down to change schools and school systems.

Part Two shifts to action, laying out the steps that are necessary to create and staff transformed schools. Chapter Four covers the school design process, which requires that school planners start with the school’s mission, vision, and desired outcomes and plan backward from there; plan strategically and divide the work among different groups and individuals; create inclusive design teams; communicate new school development plans to the larger community; develop partnerships; and find a place in a supportive network of schools. As