chapter
ONE

A Commitment to Equity

> The work of creating equitable schools has been the heart and soul of the work of the Coalition of Essential Schools. In an equitable society, test scores and graduation rates are not predetermined by incomes, race, or gender. Today's schools mirror the imbalances that exist in our society and are used to reproduce a culture of inequality. If we do not intentionally and meaningfully interrupt these inequitable practices and restructure public education, we will continue to deny a great majority of students their right to a quality education.
>
> —Excerpt from a letter to participants of a coaches' training for an equity-based Critical Friends Group facilitated by the Coalition of Essential Schools

Small Schools, Big Ideas is about changing schools in order to change lives. This book is intended for practitioners, policymakers, family members, teachers of educators, and students of education committed to transforming schools into personalized, academically challenging, and equitable places of learning. Schools dramatically affect the lives of children. Schools can capture children's

imagination and ensure the promise of a fulfilling life, or schools can severely diminish children's self-worth and their access to skills and knowledge, making it impossible for them to reach their full potential. Quite often, our schools do both: they improve the lives of children coming from our country's cultural and racial majority groups and from wealthier communities, and they create even greater challenges and disruptions in the lives of children of color who are raised in often poor, often urban communities.

The ways that we educate our children through the institution of schools can improve significantly in life-changing ways for all children, their families, their communities, and their teachers. We are not offering advice for those interested in tinkering with schools as they have been and are now. Our proposition is not to work around the dysfunctional edges of our schools. Instead, we examine what it will take to bring individual schools and systems of schools into the twenty-first century. We discuss the pathways that will create the climate and the conditions to transform education from the outdated factory-style school system already in its decline to a high-performing system of schools that creates equitable places of learning. In this book, we look at the urgency needed to move from reform to the systemic transformation of public education so that it can add value to society, find ways to close the achievement and resource gaps for all students, and prepare our youth for the demands of good citizenship, college, and career.

We use this book as an opportunity to move the discourse beyond the conventional ways that we have defined and measured achievement. The achievement gap is conventionally defined as ''the troubling performance gaps between many African-American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic white peers, and the similar academic disparity between students from low-income and well-off families. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates'' (Editorial Projects in Education, 2004). Within the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), we define achievement in ways that go beyond the limitations of a standardized set of compartmentalized knowledge items measured exclusively by standardized pen-and-paper tests. To us, achievement means obtaining a broader, deeper skill set that gives students the capacity to find information and to apply it meaningfully to a changing

world. As we explore ways of closing the achievement gap, we include both the economic and information gaps that negatively affect poor students and students of color by limiting their opportunities and access to an education that supports the habits of using their minds well, becoming lifelong learners, and gaining the enduring and emerging skills to participate fully in this country's economic and democratic promise. This is a gap that not just poor students and students of color experience, though they may suffer its effects most acutely.

In our current antiquated model of education, schools have not fully prepared students, especially students of color and poor students, with enduring literacy and numeracy skills—those fundamentals, often described as "the basics," that high-stakes standardized tests aim to assess. Nor are our schools responding well to a new challenge to teach a set of emerging skills that includes higher-order thinking; applying what has been learned; collaborating productively; influencing and negotiating power; communication and presentation skills; and understanding mathematical, technical, and scientific issues—all necessary in today's knowledge-based economy. The evolution of our education system has been halted by the imposition of a set of content standards across the country that are designed to make sure that each student is learning the same thing. The outcome has been standardization at the risk of limiting teaching and reducing learning to a set of multiple choices. By advocating for higher standards in teaching and learning and an assessment system with multiple measures, CES has surpassed the movement that enforces a set of standards that result in graduating students neither with a sturdy set of enduring skills nor with a robust set of the emerging skills needed to participate fully in and meet the demands of the twenty-first century. In *The Global Achievement Gap,* Tony Wagner (2008, pp. 14–39) names initiative and entrepreneurialism, agility and adaptability, accessing and analyzing data, and curiosity and imagination, among other competencies, as the "survival skills" that matter most for the twenty-first century (see "Twenty-First-Century Skills" sidebar). In a climate of high-stakes standardized assessment that generally limits the scope of testing to content standards, these emerging survival skills are not measured. As a result, they hold less importance in the classroom, thereby limiting the scope of education for all of our students.

Twenty-First-Century Skills

The following list represents a core set of survival skills for today's workplace, lifelong learning, and active citizenship:

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Collaboration across networks and leading by influence
- Agility and adaptability
- Initiative and entrepreneurialism
- Effective oral and written communication
- Accessing and analyzing information
- Curiosity and imagination

Source: Wagner, 2008, pp. 14–39.

Educational Equity

The equity we seek expands on the limited, hollow version of equity that some are using to legitimize a test-driven, top-down reform agenda. In New York City, Joel Klein referred in 2007 to the need to test students five more times per year in addition to the many mandated summative exams already at the core of his "equity" education agenda (Rose, 2007). Such equity comes in the form of opportunity and access to the malfunctioning remnants of the status quo: outdated curriculum and instruction that lack rigor and relevance and high-stakes standardized tests that lower the standards of teaching and learning. *Small Schools, Big Ideas* documents an authentic form of educational equity that spurs intellectual, social, and emotional growth among our young people and equips them with the tools they need to apply new knowledge in constructive ways in their lives and communities.

Like Ted Sizer before us, and John Dewey before him, we believe that the role of public education is to teach and prepare students to "use their minds well" so that they can participate in civic life. Nearly a century ago, Dewey wrote, "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife" (Dewey, 1993). As so many others have lamented, public education is not doing its part. For the most part, in urban, suburban, and rural schools, students are

not learning how to be lifelong learners, earn a living wage, or develop the agency to access and contribute to an active citizenry that works for democracy and equity. What we share in these pages is intended to raise awareness about the ways that we can remake schools to become high-performing, powerful places that prepare children and adults to be full participants in a democratic society. Through this book, we, the authors, and the Coalition of Essential Schools as an organization, network, and movement, offer ourselves as allies to families, community members, and educators interested in reinventing our school system so that it can afford all children a meaningful education that prepares them for what we know and what we can only imagine the future holds.

The historic concept of public education as a way to level the playing field has yet to be fulfilled. We hope that our descriptions of the strategies and practices used by CES practitioners across the country will move us toward fulfilling that dream, and we hope that the brave voices that speak from these pages will not be drowned out by the discontent, isolation, and frustration that many of us feel about the state of education. Take this opportunity to learn what has been accomplished, what is possible, and what we can do together to create equitable schools that will help move us toward a more equitable society.

Educational equity means that all students have access to all of the experiences, conditions, and support that they need to grow as learners and be prepared for postsecondary options. To be engaged in the pursuit of equitable education for all students means that we are "raising the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories" (Singleton and Linton, 2006, p. 46; also shown in sidebar). As we described earlier, when we refer to the gaps that exist, we mean much more than differences on standardized tests. Because we cannot address racial achievement disparities without addressing systemic racism, this work has to involve an examination of the attitudes and practices that keep these racial disparities intact (Jones, 2000). Therefore, the ways that we interrupt these inequities in our classrooms, schools, and school districts must be bold, unforgiving, strategic, and compassionate. The practices and principles shared in *Small Schools, Big Ideas* provide a road map to achieving schools and educational systems that mitigate and challenge the effects of systemic racism and shed light on the obstacles that schools, school systems, and communities face on this journey.

Definition of Educational Equity

"Educational equity is raising the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest performing students and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories."

Source: Singleton and Linton, 2006, p. 46.

Twenty-Five Years of Experience

Small Schools, Big Ideas both acknowledges the achievements of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) over the past twenty-five years and recognizes its challenges. We hope to explain the conditions that impeded many Essential schools from sustaining their successes and most school districts from taking the lessons of those successes to a deeper systemic level. Many of the short-lived reform efforts of the past several decades—which represent but a short segment of the continuum of continually disappointing attempts at silver-bullet educational reform (Tyack and Cuban, 1995)—have left many educators pessimistic about the possibility of real change. In this constantly varying, increasingly hostile climate, CES practitioners have focused on creating principle-based schools focused on equity, personalization, and high academic standards. In many instances, they have had much to celebrate as they pushed through seemingly insurmountable obstacles to improve their schools. Those leaders modeled (and are often still modeling) the kind of effort and persistence at all levels that this work demands. When these renegade leaders ran into systemic walls and were unable to continue to take cover "under the radar," they invented ways to keep moving the work forward, showing us what schools can look like when we are creative, caring, and thoughtful about putting students and families at the center. And from their tenacity grew the proof that it can be done; even under unpredictable and difficult circumstances, we can create amazing schools. In this book, we acknowledge the fruits of their labor and we stand on the shoulders of CES Mentor Schools such as Quest High School in Texas, Urban Academy Laboratory High School in New York City, and Fenway High School in Boston. They have dealt with changing mandates and conditions beyond their control that challenge the growth of their work and innovations, yet they still have produced positive results from students.

The work of the Coalition of Essential Schools started with courageous educators focused on the relationships between students and teachers. Over time, these educators created an ambitious yet attainable vision that drives today's most successful educational change efforts, which have created exemplary small schools, systems, and networks of schools. Big Picture Schools, The Boston Pilot Schools, High Tech High Schools, the New Small Autonomous Schools of Oakland, the New York Performance Standards Consortium, and other such efforts were founded and are driven by major players with roots in the CES tradition who use the CES Common Principles to guide their work. Deborah Meier, a longtime educator and leader of CES, reflects on the work of the early years of the Coalition: "We may not have changed the paradigm of American education back then, but we're still out there fighting. Take note that of those who participated in the original schools, they have been active, and our ideas persist. Failure is not just failure. It was sometimes a way for people whose schools didn't work in one context to take those ideas elsewhere and make them work."

Throughout *Small Schools, Big Ideas,* we will be referring to these examples and to the CES Common Principles, the set of ideas created twenty-five years ago when the Coalition first came together as a collective effort to reform education. The motivation for reforming schools was a desire to change instruction and the relationships between teachers and students in order to dramatically improve student outcomes. One of the major findings of CES founder Ted Sizer's pre-CES work (and related work by others) was that students were disengaged. Therefore, the impetus for reforming schools was to encourage them to re-engage students in active learning. The focus on engagement and student outcomes put the spotlight on the student-teacher interaction, and the earliest Coalition efforts viewed the classroom as the unit of change. That view has continued to expand due to both practical and moral considerations. The stories in this book illustrate how the CES Common Principles continued to be the backbone and philosophical underpinning of the work as we took it deeper and beyond the walls of the classroom to transform schools and the systems on which they depend. (Please see Appendix A for the CES Common Principles in full.)

The last Common Principle, referred to as "Democracy and Equity," provides the overarching motivation for this expanding view. It states: "The school should demonstrate non-discriminatory and inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogies. It should model democratic practices that involve all who are directly affected by the school. The school should honor diversity and build on the strength of

its communities, deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity.'' Throughout our work and within these pages, we reaffirm that our charge is to model and uphold the Common Principle of Democracy and Equity by deliberately creating small, equitable schools and systems of schools that function democratically to support a culture of learning that encourages all children and adults to reach their highest potential.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, small, public Essential high schools such as New York City's Central Park East Secondary School, founded by Deborah Meier, and rural Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, founded by Dennis Littky, challenged the ways that we envision public education (see sidebar). Put into action in the classroom, the CES Common Principles—in the ways that decisions were made and in the ways the school nurtured the relationships between teachers and students—became the basis for relevant, challenging, and student-centered experiences of teaching and learning. Such schools served as role models to stimulate other educators who were unhappy with the culture and the results of traditional schooling. Examples from Essential schools propelled others to take action. Central Park East Secondary School, Thayer High School, and other early CES schools were driven by the belief that public schools are vital to a sound democracy. Public schools have an essential public purpose: to prepare all citizens to be educated and play a vital role in our democracy. These early CES schools changed outcomes and the lives of young people; for example, one of Central Park East's achievements was a stellar college-going rate among students for whom expectations of college attendance were bleak (Bensman, 1995).

Many educators, inspired by these early adopters, worked to restructure their public schools one classroom at a time, using the CES Common Principles as their guide. Through these experiences, we learned to use these pockets of excellence within schools to stimulate schoolwide change by implementing the lessons learned in model classrooms across the school community. The work quickly moved beyond the CES teacher leaders' classrooms to a ''one school at a time'' school improvement approach that leveraged reform trends and programs to achieve more student-centered, teacher-driven schools in which everyone was learning to use their minds well. They created new small public schools wherever the climate would allow, using small school size as the vehicle to infuse personalization, rigor, and relevance into the learning environment. While many of these first CES schools helped to leverage deeper systemic change within some districts, the work of these stand-alone ''boutique'' schools did not affect the

learning conditions for a great number of students still stuck in failing large comprehensive schools. And in some instances, the bold yet fragile attempts were either ignored or swallowed up by the system.

Deborah Meier and Dennis Littky: Early CES School Leaders

For more about the work of Deborah Meier and her colleagues at Central Park East Secondary School, read her books, which include *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons to America from a Small School in Harlem* (1995) and *In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization* (2002), both published by Beacon Press. Meier is currently on the faculty of New York University's Steinhardt School of Education as senior scholar and adjunct professor. She is also active as a board member of many organizations, including Mission Hill School and the Coalition of Essential Schools, and she is a convener of the Forum for Democracy and Education.

For more about Dennis Littky's work at Thayer High School, read *Doc: The Story of Dennis Littky and His Fight for a Better School* by Susan Kammeraad-Campbell (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005), and for more on Littky's subsequent work as co-founder of the Big Picture Company, read *The Big Picture: Education Is Everyone's Business* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004). Dennis Littky is the co-founder and co-director of Big Picture Learning and the Met Center in Providence, Rhode Island.

Small Schools by Design

In *Small Schools, Big Ideas,* we discuss how small school size establishes the conditions that allow the CES Common Principles to guide the practices that cultivate an engaging culture of learning, motivating even the most vulnerable students to become active learners and promoting equitable access and opportunity for all students. As well, small school size provides the opportunities for autonomy, collaboration, and relationships that are necessary to create new ways of designing and restructuring both the learning process and the organizational practices and

policies. However, the notion that due to their size alone, small schools can change the deep-rooted inequities and dysfunctional practices in comprehensive secondary schools and raise achievement is flawed. To believe that smallness unto itself can tackle the important changes that need to take place at the cultural, institutional, and interpersonal levels of schools and districts is to miscalculate the deeply embedded causes that have led us to the status quo of students and communities ill served and ill prepared by most educational systems.

We do believe that if schools are not small or do not otherwise have conditions that allow relationships to flourish, inquiry to proceed in a sustained and challenging way, and communication to keep everyone focused on the school's mission, the status quo will persist indefinitely. *Small Schools, Big Ideas* provides further examples of why small size is one of the most important conditions for improving student engagement and performance (see also Coalition of Essential Schools, 2006) and why restructuring efforts centered on small school size must be accompanied by significant changes in our belief systems and the ways that those beliefs about students and their potential manifest in the daily decisions, operational systems, and instructional practices of public education as a whole.

In recent years, as the world of small schools became broader and more densely populated with well-intentioned funders, service providers, and practitioners, much of CES's contribution toward the philosophical underpinning of the small schools movement was either lost or misinterpreted. We know that many districts and some states, as well as the federal government through the Smaller Learning Communities grant program, have jumped on the small schools bandwagon in the course of the last decades, making it a notable trend in the annals of American school reform. Some did so because small size was part of their design principles. Many others moved toward small schools simply to chase the funding that was available. Unfortunately, the premature rush to "scale up" decoupled theory and practice, resulting in a diluted version of the small schools movement as we conceived it. To many, the final verdict on small schools is that they are yet another failed attempt at changing schools (Bloomfield, 2006), based on the claim that the pace of results is not quick enough and the value added not measurable by mainstream metrics such as standardized tests. Many make the claim that small schools are not a viable and sustainable model to which school districts should aspire because they cost too much when implemented in school districts that rely on economies of scale, although research has consistently refuted this idea (Lawrence and others, 2002; Lawrence and others, 2006).

In his 2009 annual letter, Bill Gates, co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, reflects on the nine years of work and $2 billion in grants that the foundation has invested in creating better high schools through their U.S. program. The goal was to provide additional resources to schools over a period of time to "make changes in the way they were organized (including reducing their size), in how the teachers worked, and in the curriculum." To that end, many of the small schools that were funded had more improvement in their attendance and graduation rates compared with their peers, but the majority did not significantly improve their academic outcomes. According to Gates, these "tended to be the schools that did not take radical steps to change the culture, such as allowing principals to pick the team of teachers or change the curriculum" (Gates, 2009, p. 11).

Gates's statements demonstrate that neither giving schools more money nor reducing their size will increase student achievement. The changes in schools have to go beyond surface reforms to more significant, deeper changes that transform the relationships, the schools' ability to control and deploy resources, and the pedagogical philosophy. These changes cannot happen in a vacuum. They must be done in relationship to school districts and with the involvement of teachers, students, families, and community partners; otherwise, the system will quash the momentum and dilute the change effort, rendering it useless. The exemplary schools that are discussed in these pages combine their size with intentional practices that affect the lives of students by transforming the relationships in the building and creating more personalized learning environments in which all children are well known and challenged to use their minds well. "Small schools in drag," Michelle Fine (2005) writes, will produce the same results as failing large schools. Small schools by design, however, have the potential to significantly transform outcomes and prepare all students for college, citizenship, and work.

The CES Small Schools Project and Small Schools Network

In 2003, when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation granted CES the support to launch a five-year small schools project, the CES Small Schools Project became CES's flagship initiative. This project has established us as a leader of the national conversation about small schools, and it has distinguished us by focusing on

equity as the goal of these schools. This focus on equity is critical to the vision, and it is what drives the work of the schools featured in this book. Held across all of the small schools involved in the project is the belief that students deserve to be engaged in their learning and leave school fully prepared for access to and success in multiple postsecondary options. This goal is particularly urgent for students whom the system has not served well in the past. We should not relegate our most needy and vulnerable students to the most dispiriting, unengaging schools. As long as our states and nation continue to heavily regulate and underfund public schools, particularly those in urban areas, and limit access to and opportunities for learning for a great majority of students across class and racial groups, we are reducing the potential contributions and livelihood of future generations. Small, personalized, and academically vibrant private schools exist in communities across America, and we cannot allow such schools to be the norm for only a small segment of our society. The goal of the CES Small Schools Project is to make them the norm for American public schools.

Today's CES approach is the result of a growing commitment to systemic transformation on multiple levels. With twenty-five years of experience at the forefront of school reform in the United States, the Coalition is poised to contribute a new method of school change. Partnering with our Mentor Schools across the country, CES has shaped a peer-to-peer school development approach that taps into the expertise and experience of some of the most successful small schools in the country. The twenty-four CES Mentor Schools, with their concentration of decades' worth of collaboratively constructed knowledge, have contributed valuable wisdom and experience to the landscape of small schools and the promise of equity. Using small school size as a vehicle and the CES Common Principles as their guide, these schools have given us a diverse set of models that can be used to transform our public school system. Under difficult and frequently uncertain circumstances—sometimes flying under the radar, sometimes taking on the systems to which they belong head-on—CES Mentor Schools have added value to the small schools movement by achieving high academic gains for some of the most vulnerable students in our nation. Throughout these chapters, we share the lessons they learned as they surpassed their counterparts by narrowing the achievement gap in their schools, supporting more students in reaching higher education options, and preparing them for the twenty-first century (Coalition of Essential Schools, 2006). One of their most notable accomplishments has been their ability to engage stakeholders in deep and meaningful ways for the cause of transforming

our schools. These schools have learned ways to build partnerships with parents and community members while continuing to empower teachers to lead.

The CES Small Schools Project and the resulting CES Small Schools Network (CES SSN) allowed CES to use its collective knowledge to broaden its reach and engage new constituencies in rethinking and redesigning large comprehensive high schools and growing new small schools. The Small Schools Project gave us the opportunity to examine and document the progress of some of the most exemplary schools in the country. Today, while we still believe that teachers are essential units of change, we have expanded this concept to include other important stakeholders who are often left out of the conversation: youth, families, and community. As the first decade of the twenty-first century has unfolded, CES's work has involved engaging these players in taking a more active role in change efforts at their schools, across districts, and across the country. Through the years, we have remained steadfast in the conviction that change in classroom instruction is the most important element that will increase student achievement. However, we have learned that in order to transform teaching and learning, one has to change the culture of schools and actively redesign entire systems to support and sustain those changes. The work described in these pages has evolved into creating learning communities that share best practices for improving their schools while positioning themselves to have greater influence beyond the walls of their school communities. We tell the stories of how fostering a sense of ownership in the process and outcomes of school transformation among parents, community members, and policymakers has become a priority for educators who once saw themselves as the sole leaders of early reforms. The growth of a critical mass of people who are committed to growing equitable small schools has made it possible for more students and families to experience the transformational results of attending a CES school. And given the pressures facing small schools across the country, it is essential that there be a critical mass of empowered stakeholders who can fight for and demand the climate and conditions to grow and sustain small schools as a way of delivering an equitable educational option to all students.

Building a Professional Learning Community

In *Small Schools, Big Ideas,* we offer the experience of the CES SSN as a professional learning community that has been codifying its work while implementing, testing, and documenting best practices in order to explore

and learn about the importance of establishing learning communities that engage in ongoing inquiry aimed at creating constant improvement of student outcomes. While the SSN schools are engaged in their own continuous improvement, as a network, these schools are moving through a collective cycle of inquiry that poses questions about challenges, looks at data, creates practices based on that data to respond to those challenges, measures the impact of the changes, and then continues to raise more questions that push for new innovations. This process stimulates an engaged teaching faculty, providing professional development as part of the inquiry process, and encourages the inclusion of all stakeholders in both the creation and modeling of innovative solutions. The intentionality that drives this process creates the teaching and learning that raises the standards of our schools above and beyond state and federal mandates to ensure that our students graduate as scholars, artists, and active citizens prepared to create and participate in a democratic society.

These pages contain the voices of teachers, students, and leaders of CES schools who, as a result of being part of a larger movement of small schools, comprehend more clearly what is possible within their schools and demand more of the systems and institutions to which they belong. The exchanges that happen within these learning communities and as part of the CES SSN demonstrate that schools need to be part of interschool, systemwide professional learning communities of practitioners who are concerned about similar questions and empowered to critique and challenge each other and push for change as needed. Innovative schools need the systems of which they are a part to carve out a space for like-minded schools with more freedom and flexibility to act on behalf of their students and to use multiple approaches to achieve and demonstrate their progress.

To this end, CES has been working with a range of districts and local partners to ensure the systemic viability of our new small schools. Hard-learned lessons led us to this work; many wonderful, magical, and influential first-generation Essential schools did not maintain their programs because they were islands. Their Essential school efforts were not part of their larger districts and systems or supported by them. From experiences such as that of Denver's Manual High School, CES learned that unless the district creates the space within its system to own its reform with top-down support, change will not last. Schools will become embattled with the powers that be, dissipating their energy in the struggle. Each time such schools go under, children, their families, and the public suffer the multiple blows of unmet needs, broken promises, and lost hope in public education.

We cannot build walls around Essential schools to shield them from the influences of district, state, and federal policies. Instead, we need to use their existence as levers to create the climate and conditions for the growth and sustainability of small, equitable schools. In this book, we share our most compelling examples of success—the Boston Pilot Schools, the Belmont Zone of Choice, and the schools that are part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium—as networks of schools that have policies in place that allow the schools some genuine autonomy from the systems in which they reside. Though such arrangements are not the current norm, they urge us to create policy environments that allow more autonomy while continuing to demand accountability. Through the innovative disruption that we discuss, the architects of these networks influenced policies, developed agreements, and secured commitments that both ensure the sustainability of new and existing small schools and can serve as a catalyst for the improvement—and eventual transformation—of all schools in the district. The kind of innovative disruption that we propose can spur district leadership to rethink systems, policies, distribution of resources, and the district's relationships with schools.

Since its founding, CES has acted on the belief that practitioners—educators and school leaders closest to students and the processes of teaching and learning—are the experts and should be at the forefront of any change effort. Intentionally, they are among the loudest and most pronounced voices heard throughout this book because through their firsthand experience, we learn what works best for children and youth. Through their leadership and involvement, we are reminded to keep students at the center and make every decision with the intention of improving academic results for all students. The CES SSN has also furthered the involvement and leadership of students themselves in the work of school transformation—for, of course, no one is closer to the students than students. Their voices are well represented in *Small Schools, Big Ideas,* too. In addition, the idea that we are all learners and that in order to find the solutions that we are searching for in urban education, we need to nurture and include all voices is embedded in this book and in the overall mission of the CES Small Schools Project. Over the last five years, we have invested in nurturing and lifting the voices of teachers of color and creating a diverse new cadre of CES leaders. The CES SSN has served as a place to grow our craft as educators, and it has opened up another important opportunity: the chance to sharpen our focus on issues of educational equity and speak out loud our commitment to this work.

That is why equity, captured for us in the ''Democracy and Equity'' Common Principle, is the project's focal point and the underlying intentional thread that weaves together the chapters of this book.

Leading for Equity

The current thrust of federal education policy—top-down policy that does not support innovation, punishes schools, and invalidates the experience of teachers and students—cannot endure without further inflicting serious damage to the system of public education and our nation as a whole. The constant drumbeat decrying failing schools saps public confidence and undermines the willingness to provide the kind of resources that an endeavor of the magnitude and importance of reinventing public education requires and deserves. The increasing resistance to state and federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind is a good indicator that the American public, while seeking more accountability from schools, seeks change in the ways that we provide resources to our schools and evaluate their performance (Rose and Gallup, 2007). Many educators, family members, students, and community members have already come to understand why our current system is not working for the great majority of students, including poor students and students of color. What they now need are examples of what else is possible today. CES is committed to developing healthier ways of fully educating our young people by creating better schools for them, influencing the climate and conditions in which those schools exist, and advocating for performance-based assessments that can truly measure the skills that matter. Educators in thousands of schools nationwide—as evidenced by participation in the federal Smaller Learning Communities grant program and other measures—are looking for material that will help their schools immediately improve their students' academic performance. We respond to that sense of urgency by sharing the stories, data, and tools in these pages, which those seeking different ways to achieve better outcomes for students may find useful or even transformative.

We don't pretend that this work will be easy. Public education is already badly underfunded, and this situation is not likely to change anytime soon. This situation cannot be a barrier to action; rather, it should be a call to use what resources we have more wisely. It makes no sense to continue using funds in ways that we know can't achieve the desired results. In these pages are stories of schools that have used the resources they have in smarter ways—ways that truly serve all children.

The ideas and practices we share in this guide will help school communities find ways to address their sense of urgency through equitable teaching and learning and to take action at a deeper systemic level in order to sustain their achievements. With this new work, the Coalition has been able to focus with intensity on the CES Common Principles, the original ideas that drove our work toward the essential condition of smallness. And through development of new tools such as the CES Benchmarks that have come out of the CES SSN, we are contributing a new body of knowledge and practice that documents the best organizational and instructional practices of CES. (For more on the CES Benchmarks, consult Appendix B.)

Through the vehicle of education, CES has taken up the work of equity and thus the fight for social justice. We remind readers to think of the urgent charge at hand: to close the racial and economic achievement gap and create equitable learning environments for all. Equitable learning environments cannot be created while we remain silent about the institutionalized oppressive practices and attitudes that create the disparities that mar our schools and negatively affect our students. Achieving these goals involves raising the race and class consciousness of educators and moving the discourse from reform to transformation. CES practitioners attempt to move the discourse about school change beyond remedies that address the symptoms to strategic thinking, planning, and action that address what causes the United States to have a failing public school system. Without the work required to identify that failure's root causes, we will continue to use the same approaches that got us to where we are now.

As part of that charge, we will need to cultivate the voices of those who have taken up the work and prepare them to engage in authentic dialogue across differences to better understand how people experience oppression, power, privilege, and hegemony in and out of schools. This book provides a space for educators, family members, students and community members to speak their truths, push against the mainstream, and rattle the status quo. In these pages, we weave these stories, experiences, practices, and ideas together and unleash the power that educators have to tell our truth, to face what we do not know, and to learn together how to transform our schools for the sake of our children.

Small Schools, Big Ideas aims to stimulate hope and action by sharing the best of the experiences of educators, families, students, administrators, and community members who successfully started or remade their own schools. We invite our readers to join this movement for educational equity.