

**Iconic School-Reform Group Ends 33-Year Run  
Group's national office to close soon  
By Madeline Will**

The Coalition of Essential Schools, a progressively oriented school reform network whose work has spanned three decades, will cease its national operations by the end of the month.

Theodore R.Sizer, the **late author, professor, and education school dean**, started the coalition in 1984 with a vision of creating schools that are more personal, democratic, and engaging for students. The movement was influenced in part by Sizer's most famous book, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Now, 150 schools follow the coalition's 10 common principles of intellectual, equitable, and student-centered teaching and learning.

"When Ted Sizer started CES, he said real clearly, this is a conversation amongst friends about how to best engage young people in learning in schools," said George Wood, the chairman of the coalition's executive board. "The idea was not to have an organization here forever. The idea was to get the conversation started about having more meaningful learning experiences for kids."

But now, he said, the ideas are out there. Performance-based assessments, teacher-student advisory groups, and personalized learning are among the concepts that emerged from the organization's work to become common in schools today, he said. "There are all these practices out there that people don't know came from CES," Wood said. "The real legacy of CES is that Ted Sizer and his colleagues directed attention back to what really matters, and it's life in classrooms—life of children and teachers in classrooms."

**Practical Concerns**

Still, there were brass-tack concerns: For the past few years, it's been harder to get funding, said Deborah Meier, the vice chairwoman of the coalition's executive board, who was involved in the founding of the group.

Foundations are now interested in seeing reform movements scaled up and replicated, said Meier, who also writes **an opinion blog** for *Education Week*. But the coalition was founded on the concept of local democracy and the idea that individual communities should design their own learning sites, she said.

Also, a lot of the coalition's work with schools has been taken over by regional affiliates, Wood said, so a national office was no longer necessary.

"The decision was made that it was better to close than to fade out like we were doing," Meier said.

The executive board made the decision in late 2015 and took the next year to **document the coalition's impact** and gather resources that will continue to live on its website. In December, the coalition hosted its final Fall Forum, an annual gathering of progressive educators.

The coalition was also a victim of changing trends in education policy. As policymakers increasingly focused on standardized testing, standards, and accountability, the influence of the coalition waned.

Wood said educators' and policymakers' focus on quick results and raising student test scores hurt the organization, which advocates a philosophy of deep, masterful learning. "CES is not about preparing children to do well on a single measure of accountability," Wood said. "We weren't out there trying to sell a get-smart-quick plan."

Much of the current landscape of education is almost antithetical to Sizer's and the coalition's principles, said Marc Tucker, the president and CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy and the author of [another opinion blog for Education Week](#). For example, Sizer was committed to the idea of teachers as professionals. The notion that teachers are there to carry out the ideas of a central office would be abhorrent to him, Tucker said. "I suppose I see the coalition, in a way, as a fish out of water," Tucker said. "It would be very hard for the coalition to swim in today's environment and survive, so it's hardly surprising it's closing its doors. But the underlying themes of its work ... predated Ted by many, many decades and will survive long after the coalition itself."

Some CES concepts now live under different names and movements, Tucker said—like deep learning, the idea that learning should focus on students' ability to reason and think well, and not on test scores.

The new federal K-12 law, the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), de-emphasizes standardized-test scores, and Wood said he was optimistic that the pendulum might swing back. In the meantime, he hopes the schools that are part of the coalition will inspire policy through their success.

Wood is the superintendent of the Federal Hocking Local Schools in Stewart, Ohio, which is part of the coalition. "The legacy of CES is right down the hall from me," he said.

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