

# Ted Sizer and Jerry Bracey: An Appreciation

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## Ted Sizer and Jerry Bracey An Appreciation

By Alfie Kohn

*The field of education lost two great men in October. Ted Sizer and Jerry Bracey were distinguished by the issues that animated them and the way they pursued their respective interests, but each made such an enormous contribution that his death leaves us bereft.*

*In person, Ted Sizer was good-humored and gracious to a fault. Unlike those people who are mightily impressed with their own accomplishments, Ted, whose résumé was extraordinary by any measure, mostly wanted to know what you had to say. His empathy for both teachers and students wafts off the pages of his Horace trilogy. If you haven't read these books, you must. If it's been a few years, revisit them. His big ideas are there, laid out in remarkably graceful prose – the notion that “less is more” when it comes to curriculum, the idea of “exhibitions of mastery” that will allow students to show us what they understand rather than just coughing up particles of knowledge they've committed to memory – but it's his feel for the details of school life that draws you in and wins you over.*

*Ted advised us to follow a high school student around for a full day in case we've forgotten what it's like "to change subjects abruptly every hour, to be talked at incessantly, to be asked to sit still for long periods, to be endlessly tested and measured against others, to be moved around in cohorts by people who really do not know who you are, to be denied any civility like a coffee break and asked to eat lunch in twenty-three minutes, to be rarely trusted, and to repeat the same regimen with virtually no variation for week after week, year after year."*

*Ted was a big-picture school reformer, with a keen sense of how structural changes ought to be made – major changes, at that; he exhibited a polite but persistent impatience with incrementalism – but he was nothing like the camera-ready school reformers whose call to arms is based on corporate abstractions. He never forgot that the goal isn't Tougher Standards or Accountability. It's to help kids engage in "serious thought, respectful skepticism, and curiosity about much of what lies beyond their immediate lives." He and Debbie Meier hatched the **Coalition of Essential Schools** to create real standards-based reform, not to promulgate standards that are lists of "things that will be covered . . . [and] put into the head of the student." He wasn't interested in "delivering instruction," a metaphor employed unself-consciously by the kind of people whose idea of school improvement, he once said, involves "testing the kids until they begged for mercy."*

*Ted watched with the eye of a novelist, noticing the "rows of twitching Adidas" on a classroom floor, feeling the teachers' barely suppressed outrage at yet another interruption by the "malevolent intruder" known as the public address system. He spotted the wink-wink conspiracy between burnt-out teachers and burnt-out kids in traditional schools, the "façade of orderly purposefulness" they created together that allowed both parties to minimize hassle even though that meant little*

real learning was taking place.

But he knew these deficiencies weren't randomly distributed. "Tell me the incomes of your students' families," he wrote, "and I'll describe to you your school." He grasped the macro – how hard it is to change a school so it stays changed – but also the micro, such as how teaching honors-track seniors in the fall (when all they can think about is college) is very different from teaching them in the spring (when their goal is "to have a party and, if white, to get a tan").

If we lived in a country where a real thinker like Ted Sizer, rather than clueless managerial types and cliché-spouting politicians, got to be the Secretary of Education, maybe we wouldn't need his wisdom so badly.

Nor would we need Jerry Bracey's compulsive, perpetually irritated truth-telling. Where Ted charmed even his ideological opponents, Jerry pissed off even some of his allies. In what was apparently the last missive he banged out before going to sleep for the last time, a response to a newspaper article about "value-added" assessment techniques, he began as follows: "I can't believe that this piece of crap appeared in the L.A. Times." This he wrote to people who worked at the L.A. Times.

But then he went on to show exactly why it was crap and cited the National Research Council (with a link attached to the appropriate report). When he knew exactly what the data showed on a subject, which was often, he was impatient with people who didn't. He was even less forgiving of people who wrote about the subject as if they knew what they were talking about when that obviously wasn't true. Worst of all were those politicians, researchers, and journalists who deliberately distorted the data. Those people he skewered without mercy or tact.

Jerry was my go-to guy for the numbers, as he was for many

others. He had an unerring crap detector, an amazing quantitative skill set, and the patience to drill down into thick reports to find their mistaken premises, their statistical flaws, the reason that their confident conclusions weren't worth the paper they were written on. Nobody was his equal in debunking empirical claims about charter schools and the effects of retention, the dubious connection between student achievement and economic productivity, the fatal methodological problems with international comparisons (TIMSS, PISA) and the results of NAEP exams (too few kids "proficient"? don't get him started). Forget the theory and politics underlying the Nation at Risk report; when Jerry got through with the numbers, it was exposed for the ideological piece of garbage it was. Same for the Heritage Foundation's "No Excuses" paper with its list of low-income schools that ostensibly proved poverty wasn't a real barrier if you just buckled down.

Jerry had an ego – who doesn't? – but he didn't want us to depend on him to dissect a report. His books, *Setting the Record Straight*, *Reading Educational Research*, *Bail Me Out*, and, most recently, *Education Hell: Rhetoric vs. Reality*, were intended not only to expose the public-school bashers as frauds, and not only to show us exactly what kinds of games they were playing with numbers, but to teach us how we, too, could spot errors and lies.

I hate not being able to e-mail Jerry with a question now, as I did a few days before he died, so he could spare me from doing my own analysis. I hate not having Ted around to remind us what schools should be about and how they can be restructured to do right by kids. Thankfully each man left us a substantial collection of books and articles to remind us of his work and to inspire us to carry it on.

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