

Teach Reflect Learn



Building Your Capacity
for Success in the Classroom

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1

If You Can Read This, Thank a Teacher

*“In a completely rational society, the best of us would be teachers
and the rest of us would have to settle for something less.”*

—Lee Iacocca

To determine whether or not you need to continue reading, we’ll begin this book with a short quiz. If you answer *yes* to any of the following questions, please put this book down, pour yourself a glass of chardonnay, and enjoy the beach. If not, then this book is for you.

Question 1

Are our students learning as much as they possibly can? YES NO

Question 2

Are our schools as effective as they can possibly be? YES NO

Question 3

Are my students achieving as much as they possibly can? YES NO

Question 4

Am I as effective as I can possibly be? YES NO

Teachers, administrators, lawmakers, politicians, parents, students, groundskeepers, auto mechanics, chefs, professional baseball players, and all other heretofore unnamed living humans agree: our schools could

be better. Our students could learn more. Our teachers could teach more effectively. Our student achievement rates could be higher. Our achievement gaps could be closed. Not only *could* all these things occur, but they *can*. It's possible. It's likely. And—gasp!—it's not really that difficult.

We could inundate you with data about international test scores in reading and math right now, sharing the turbulent history of American education and the major events that led us to our current status, and we'd be sure to sigh in exasperation alongside you at the collective shortcomings of our nation. In fact, in our 2008 leadership text, *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success*, that's exactly how we built our case. That's actually part of the formula for school-improvement texts. Pick up any book on school leadership, best practices, or school improvement, and you'll read the same outline.

We trust that you're already living this reality. Our kids are not learning at the rates they could be learning, and, frankly, it's our responsibility as professional educators to improve the way we practice education in order to achieve that simple goal. So let's get moving, shall we? How do we improve our schools, our teaching, and our students' learning?

We build our capacity for success.

The Center of the Universe

It was a typical spring afternoon at an elementary school in Reno, Nevada. As the final bell rang, signifying the end of another school day, children cascaded out of the 2nd grade classroom—an exuberant cacophony of sing-song, delight, and energy. The teacher, having escorted her students to the bus lines and their awaiting parents, now sat wearily at her desk, exhausted by the demands of the day and the prospect of grading, lesson planning, and preparing for the following day's lessons.

The pitter-patter of gentle footsteps revealed the presence of a single returning youngster. With a toothless grin, the student dug into his backpack and pulled out a folded, handmade card. He extended it across the cluttered but organized desk, where his teacher warmly accepted it, their eyes meeting briefly. As she unfolded the card and read the handwritten inscription, her heart beamed.

“Teacher, you are the center of the universe.”

In an instant, the teacher melted. The demands of the school’s accountability system, the pace of the curriculum, the pressure to raise academic scores, the long hours and meager pay, and the sheer exhaustion she felt moments ago dissipated in the words of that simple card. With tears welling in her eyes, she looked up to thank her admirer for taking the time to share his gratitude. And as is so often the case in education, he was already gone.

With all due respect to this loving and appreciative 2nd grader’s gesture, we’d like to bring the message a little closer to home and craft an astronomically correct metaphor to illustrate his point. We believe the teacher is—*you are*—the center of the solar system.

Whereas the universe is vast and infinite, our solar system has definable boundaries and very clear, understandable properties. The center of the solar system is our sun, which has remarkable similarities to each and every one of you. What does the sun do? It provides life, offers warmth, gives us light (one might even say it illuminates), allows us to shine, and helps us grow. Earth revolves around it, staying connected by an invisible relationship that is unyielding, resilient, and designed to strengthen the quality of life for all of the planet’s inhabitants.

The sun is brilliant, consistent, strong, intense, abundant, and supportive. The sun is, indeed, a star. And so are you. For every child, every class, every course, every school, every district, and every setting, you are the center of the solar system. And this book is for you.

How Important is The Teacher?

Less than half a century ago, conventional wisdom did not hold that a teacher's influence could have much of an impact on an individual student's growth, much less on the academic gains of the masses. The influential Coleman Report reported that outside influences—namely, poverty and family upbringing—were better predictors of student success than anything else. In fact, it substantiated the ideas that a teacher was at the mercy of a child's social condition (Coleman, 1966). Seventeen years later, the U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published its damning report, *A Nation at Risk*. Its thesis was clear: our education system was in shambles, we were falling behind our international competition, and our schools were the primary culprits.

These two ideas could not peacefully coexist. One claimed that teachers didn't matter; the other asserted that teachers were the cause of our collective struggles. But how could our schools be failing so considerably if the teachers inside them were at the mercy of poverty and parenting?

Then we had research on teacher quality.

John Hattie's 2009 meta-analysis, *Visible Learning*, painted a very clear picture of the factors influencing student achievement. By compiling hundreds of research studies spanning 30 years and involving millions of students, Hattie provides the preeminent foundation of research-supported "best practices." And guess what was at the top of the list? Teacher quality.

In fact, Hattie's study determined that 9 of the top 13 influences on student achievement were teacher- or teaching-related. The magnitude of this research project, along with the descriptions and commentary on the strategies therein, provide compelling reasons to renew a sense of optimism

about our collective (and individual) ability to change the educational fortunes of the students seated in front of us every day.

Other education researchers have weighed in to support these findings. When research-based best practices guru Robert Marzano penned *The Art and Science of Teaching* (2007), he dispelled any lingering doubts that teachers impact learning: “One can conclude that the question as to whether effective teachers make a significant difference in student achievement has been answered. They do!” (p. 2). Shortly thereafter, Marzano collaborated with Rick DuFour and offered this premise for school improvement: “Schools must utilize strategies that result in more good teaching in more classrooms more of the time” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 20). Bryan Goodwin and Elizabeth Ross Hubbell of McREL International solidified this argument by stating emphatically, “Decades of research suggest that effective teachers can have a tremendous, positive effect on student success” (2013, p. xiii).

Recently, the tide has turned again. Legislators, government officials, the media, and the public have reduced teaching to formulaic instruction, standardized tests, and a simplified emphasis on scores. In an age where data drive all that we do, it’s easy to forget that education is ultimately a people-centered business. Teachers are human, and that’s a good thing. Even the push for online learning, virtual classes, and a computer for every child relies heavily on the fact that there’s a person behind it all. Robots, even those with advanced artificial intelligence capabilities, cannot replicate a teacher’s ability to build relationships, create dynamic learning experiences, provide differentiated feedback, and spur students’ love of learning.

We can have automated teller machines dispense money from our bank accounts, but we can’t have automated teaching machines. We need teachers.

Alisa’s Approach

I’ll never forget the day Mrs. Johnson walked into my office. She hesitantly asked if she could speak with me and closed the door behind her.


Sitting down, she burst into tears. “I just need to cry for a moment and then I’ll be okay. My class is so low this year. They have so many needs. Alexis and her family just got kicked out of their house and are living out of a motel. My new student, Kai, refuses to do any work—he’s a very angry child. Both of his parents are in jail, and he just was taken out of foster care to live with his grandma. I have two non-English speakers, three students on daily behavior plans, and eight that are receiving academic interventions right now—several of whom I have major concerns about. My heart is breaking for this class and I’m overwhelmed.”

This scenario is all too familiar for anyone who has spent time inside a school. Far beyond curriculum, standards, and test scores are the daily challenges of teaching children who come to school with a limitless supply of problems and struggles. We teach because we want children to grow, learn, and become successful adults, but there’s so much more to the story.

We dry tears. We break up fights, mediate conflicts, and mentor others through tough social situations. We work to keep sleep-deprived students alert and engaged. We hug students who have experienced the emotional trauma of their parents’ separation, divorce, or abandonment. We comfort students who experience a death in the family, drug overdose, neighborhood shooting, or physical or sexual abuse. We purchase clothing, backpacks, school supplies, food, and books so students have one less thing to worry about.

Teachers are on the front lines each and every day. They absorb the joys and pains of every child who walks through the classroom door.

Mrs. Johnson rallied and walked out of my office that day. She walked back into her classroom and proceeded to do exactly what she has always done. She cared for, loved, and supported each of her students. She sought out new strategies, tried old ones, and figured out a way to help every child learn. And her students? They thrived and grew, engaged and learned. They left that classroom at the end of the year better individuals because of the investment Mrs. Johnson made in their lives.



Put Your Money Where Your Teacher Is

How important is the teacher? There are historical ties to their reverence. To wit: the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle extolled the virtues of the educator by stating, “Those who educate children well are more to be honored than they who produce them; for these only gave them life, those the art of living well.” And that was in 325 BCE, just a few years before No Child Left Behind!

Let’s consider the purpose of schooling: to educate the masses and prepare individuals for successful participation in society. Horace Mann, education reformer of the early 19th century, helped to define the original calling by stating, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” How can we measure an individual’s success as a citizen? One way is to examine the bottom line.

Recently, two major studies have examined the collective and individual financial impact of having high-quality teachers. In one landmark project, researchers Raj Chetty and John Friedman of Harvard University and Jonah Rockoff of Columbia University examined the long-range earnings potential of students who were assigned to teachers with high value-added rankings (i.e., those whose impact on a single group of students was significantly higher than their peers, according to various assessment measures). Keep in mind that this study was published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, so it carries quite a bit of clout (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011).

With a statistical process free of bias and a case size of 2.5 million students, the results are staggering. Having a high-quality teacher, even for one year, can have a tremendous impact across many measures. Students assigned to high value-added teachers are more likely to attend college, earn higher salaries, and save more for retirement. They are also less likely to become teenage parents. These are all desirable outcomes for an education system working for the betterment of society, wouldn’t you agree?

For the number-crunchers out there, this study revealed an average increase of \$80,000 in lifetime earnings for just one year of schooling with a high value-added teacher. Do the math: 13 years in the K–12 system with exceptional teachers could have an impact of \$1.24 million in additional earnings for one student! For a high value-added teacher with 25 students, that’s an economic gain of \$2 million per year for just one class.

A second study, conducted by economic analyst Eric Hanushek (2011) of Stanford University, also examined the collective financial impact of increasing teacher quality. While he identified the impact of high value-added teachers on individual earnings potential, he simultaneously proposed a more widespread economic rationale for improving the teaching force. According to his calculations, there exists an immense benefit to cultivating teacher quality. Over the course of a lifetime, increasing our teachers’ value could yield the U.S. economy an additional \$112 trillion.

What’s a great teacher worth? Plenty.

Hero: A New Definition

Recently, a teacher was spotted in a crowded middle school hallway in Spokane, Washington, sporting a T-shirt emblazoned with this message: “I’m a teacher. What’s your superpower?”

This got us thinking. In our society, where do teachers rank? Publicly, financially, socially, and in the media, how do our educators fare? Wouldn’t it be nice if this were the storybook narrative passed along, from generation to generation?

The cries were faint but audible. Locked in a high tower in a dangerous castle guarded by a terrible dragon, the helpless maiden longed for a hero in shining armor to rescue her.

Alas, the tower was constructed of trauma and poverty, a life pieced together by the day, the hour, the minute, and housed in the chaotic reality of struggle: the struggle to learn, the struggle to connect, and the struggle to

survive. The castle, perhaps decrepit or maybe just overlooked, was encircled by a dangerous moat of uncertainty and fading hope. The dragon, relentless and hissing, feasted on ambition and drank the tears of despair while guarding its innocent but vulnerable captive.

Ho! What glorious knight arrived at breakneck pace across the moonlight plain? 'Twas the teacher, of course, riding a stallion of courage, carrying a shield of empathy, and waving a sword of steel expectations. Across the moat in a single bound, our hero provided a safe and caring environment for our young innocent to learn, persevere, excel, and overcome.

Once extracted, our youngster tamed the dragon, rebuilt the castle, and remodeled the tower into an observatory . . . so she could keep a good eye on the entire kingdom. The teacher saved the day!

There are plenty of examples of heroic teachers, individuals with seemingly superhuman amounts of gusto, insight, perseverance, and interpersonal skills . . . and versions of them indeed exist in Hollywood. We know the stories of Erin Gruwell (*The Freedom Writers Diary*), Jaime Escalante (*Stand and Deliver*), and Lou Anne Johnson (*Dangerous Minds*) because of the films in which they were portrayed.

However, those stories are few and far between. It is our contention that within every teacher is a hero. One needn't leap onto desktops to motivate learners (though Robin Williams's excellent performance in *Dead Poets Society* might inspire us to do just that!). True teaching heroism, in our humble opinion, is found in the day-to-day grind. It's in the way that teachers lead their students down the circuitous path to learning, navigating rough terrain and all sorts of obstacles, creatively and passionately insisting that success is the only option.

Teachers are our everyday heroes, thanks to their resolve, grit, energy, commitment, kindness, benevolence, honor, endurance, wisdom . . . this list could reach to the stars (or at least the sun).

Pete's Perspective

When I was a child growing up in Oregon, my 6th grade language arts teacher was Mrs. Andrews. There's one thing I want to make perfectly clear right up front: Mrs. Andrews was a great teacher. And when I say great, I mean she was wonderful. Fantastic. The best.

You might ask what it was that made Mrs. Andrews such a great teacher. Well, there were a lot of things. I'm sure she had a solid grasp on the curriculum. She must have known a lot about formative assessments. She was a thorough lesson-plan writer. And she must have worked collaboratively with her colleagues in the building. Most likely, she had all of the characteristics you might read about in a research article about "effective teachers."

But that wasn't what made her great to me.

To me, you see, Mrs. Andrews wasn't just a teacher. She was an angel. When I walked into her classroom every day, I felt like the king of the world. Each day, I held on tight to my chair, for fear that I might actually start flying around the room. When the bell rang and class began, I was drawn into her lesson like a tractor beam. I participated, became engaged, and was engrossed.

Mrs. Andrews made me feel special. She asked about my day, what I was up to, and when my next basketball game was. I was pretty sure that every time she smiled, it was for me. She was attentive to my work and always asked questions about the content that made me think harder and pay more attention, which I did gladly. She demanded excellence from me and never settled for less. She had high expectations, and you'd better believe I was going to meet them! Her classroom was safe, inviting, warm, and fun. Again, I was certain that she set it up that way just for me. To her, obviously, I was special.

A certain amount of time has passed since I was in 6th grade, and I've now been working in schools as a teacher or administrator for the past 15 years. As I reflect on my memories and thoughts of Mrs. Andrews, a new realization has hit me. Mrs. Andrews made me feel special, sure, and that's terrific. But what truly made her a great teacher was something

else: she made *everybody* feel special. She welcomed every child into her classroom, enthusiastically building relationships and embracing the challenge of teaching every student in the most effective way possible. She raised the bar for all of us. That was her calling, and she relished it.

I can't recall all of the material I learned in that 6th grade class, but I'm quite certain I used that knowledge and those skills to succeed in high school, college, and beyond. After all these years, what sticks with me even more is the difference one teacher made in my life—the self-confidence, desire to learn more, high expectations I began to place on myself, and joy.

Every so often, I think of that fabulous, magnificent teacher. I then think of the hundreds (maybe thousands) of students who likely felt just as I did in her class: like the most special person in the world, someone truly capable of doing anything I set my mind to.

Then I think of the thousands upon thousands of teachers just like her, dedicating everything they've got to the children under their care—making them feel special, inspiring them, encouraging them, and teaching them.

To each and every teacher out there, today I share this refrain: Thank you, Mrs. Andrews. Thank you.

.....

If our interpretation of the overwhelming research on teacher quality is indeed accurate, then it's our collective responsibility to engage in an ongoing pursuit of excellence. Let's make *continuous improvement* the new status quo. As we become more effective, our students learn more and our yield becomes more robust and bountiful. We cannot wait. Just think of the impact we can have on student learning, on the development of our youth, on the quality of our schools, and on the state of affairs in the profession of education. Just think . . . reflect . . . that's the key.

For most of us, education isn't just a job or profession or something we do during the school year. It's a calling. And we're not called to mediocrity. We're called to make a difference. To impact the future. To change students'

lives. To help our young people become the amazing, wonderful human beings they're meant to be.

And our charge—to maximize our impact through continuous improvement—is a calling we must heed. Let's spread our professional wings, grow as reflective practitioners and skilled educators, and fulfill the destiny of that calling.



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About the Authors

Pete Hall

Veteran school administrator and professional development agent Pete Hall has dedicated his career to supporting the improvement of our education systems. Besides partnering with Alisa Simeral on this and their first book together, he authored *The First-Year Principal* (Scarecrow Education, 2004) and *Lead On! Motivational Lessons for School Leaders* (Eye on Education, 2011). Pete currently works as an educational consultant as a member of the ASCD Faculty and trains educators worldwide. You can contact him via email at Pete.Hall.Faculty@ASCD.org or catch his Twitter feeds at [@EducationHall](https://twitter.com/EducationHall).

Alisa Simeral

School turnaround specialist and veteran educator Alisa Simeral has guided school-based reform efforts as a teacher, dean, and instructional coach. Her emphasis is, and always has been, improving the adult-input factors that contribute to the betterment of the student-output results. She partnered with Pete Hall to write their first book together, *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success: A Collaborative Approach for Coaches and School Leaders* (ASCD, 2008), and already has plans for their next writing venture. Passionate about providing support where it's needed most—at the classroom level—her mantra is “When our teachers succeed, our students succeed.”