REGIE ROUTMAN

READ, WRITE, LEAD

Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success

ASCD

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction: Why This Book, and Who Is It For?

This is a book about literacy and leadership. Through a lifetime of working in schools, one of my most powerful insights and core beliefs is that *teachers must be leaders, and principals must know literacy.* Without a synergy between literacy and leadership and a committed, joint effort by teachers and principals, fragile achievement gains do not hold. Although much has been written about leadership and learning as well as literacy and learning, little has been written about the crucial interconnection between literacy and leadership for ensuring that all students become effective readers and writers. That partnership is at the heart of successful schoolwide literacy and at the heart of this book.

This is a book about sustainable school change through professional learning. It is not professional development, per se, that leads to increased achievement but rather shared learning in a high-trust, schoolwide environment where everyone is committed to learning more and doing better for all students and teachers in the school. It is an embedded schoolwide culture of thoughtful professional learning, gained through informed debate, dialogue, and reflection, that leads to classroom application of more effective literacy instruction and assessment and, ultimately, higher student achievement, engagement, and enjoyment. In particular, it is the creation and sustained activity of Professional *Literacy* Communities, permeating all aspects of school life, that lead to improved student achievement across the

curriculum. Although such cultures and communities of deep and ongoing learning are uncommon, they are essential for enduring and meaningful change. Any lasting improvement in literacy through implementation of the Common Core State Standards in the United States, the provincial curricula in Canada, or international benchmarks will depend on such collaborative communities.

This is a book about hope, learning energy, and possibilities. Key to its premise is the belief that each of us has the potential, if we become highly knowledgeable and committed to high levels of success for every student, to make change through our individual and collective actions, and that ultimately we can change the outcome for students, even in our most challenging schools. What has often been missing from our collective work is the unrelenting commitment to the belief that through our own agency and efficacy we can change preconceived expectations and results for students. Sometimes this means stepping out of our comfort zones to advocate for saner practices.

Ultimately we want students and teachers alike to become self-determining learners who set and then carry through on their own worthwhile goals and objectives, some of which extend beyond themselves. It's slow, plodding, messy work that is often discouraging, but it's essential for improving the lives of our students, many of whom deserve more than what they are getting in our still segregated schools of the 21st century.

This is a book about effective literacy practices and becoming literate. Although the latest standards raise the bar for student achievement and give us a clear blueprint for what we need to be teaching, the "how" of that teaching is not defined, which puts a huge responsibility—ready or not—on schools and districts. As well, most often there has been no consistent or coherent professional development plan provided for changing local, national, and global education. Implementing standards in a manner that will actually improve education for all our students is up to us, so it's critical that we have the knowledge to do so.

My aim is to demonstrate what actions, habits, processes, and reading and writing practices are most crucial to teach and assess, and how to apply those literacy practices in a manner that engages all students and is respectful of their needs, interests, and cultures. It is not literacy practices, per se, that matter but practices that lead to developing literate and thoughtful individuals. These individuals are students and teachers who don't just

know how to read and write but who are well read and knowledgeable; able to think, analyze, and support opinions and arguments through facts, experiences, and reasoning; and able to clearly articulate their thinking through writing and speaking. What matters is becoming literate to lead a full and meaningful life.

This is a book about how good teachers can become remarkable teachers. Through stories of teachers in diverse schools and examples of collaborative reading and writing work with students and teachers, this book demonstrates how literacy change happens. It specifies what it takes for us educators to move out of our comfort zones and shift our existing beliefs and practices to become more effective, efficient, and joyful teachers—all with the end goal of increased student learning across a whole school. It also highlights teachers who have become increasingly adept at combining advocacy and leadership in their instructional roles, and it presents their voices.

This is a book about effective leadership practices. A unique aspect of this book is that the focus on leadership includes teacher leadership, along with principal leadership, as essential to whole-school achievement. How teacher-leaders develop and their influence on a staff's cohesiveness and collaboration—and, ultimately, student and teacher achievement—are delineated. As well, the necessity of a strong and active school leadership team and how that works are fully discussed.

This is a book about how dedicated principals can become outstanding instructional leaders. Evolving stories of principals in diverse schools provide insights into the knowledge and practices that make it possible for a principal to begin to create a whole school of highly effective literacy teachers and teacher-leaders. Included are suggestions for how to coach a principal on what to look for in a classroom and how to give effective feedback that moves teachers and learners forward, so that the process of observing teachers, working with them, and coaching them in their own classrooms becomes a positive and respectful one for principals and teachers alike. And, most important, numerous examples show what it looks like and sounds like to create a highly effective, ongoing professional collaboration among the principal, teachers, and students that raises achievement and possibilities for all.

This is not a book about school reform. That is, this book is not about changing a whole system of schools through policies, politics, prescriptions,

and new assessments proposed by states or the federal government. Historically, such efforts have cost billions of dollars and have had, at best, mixed results. Rather, this book is about school change and how thoughtful, committed educators can make a lasting impact through teaching and leading well—one school, one principal, one teacher, and one student at a time. This is a story about how worthwhile change can be sustained and how changes in one school can jumpstart change in other schools. This is a book for those of us who have an unwavering commitment to do the necessary and hard work of getting better at what we do and who have learned that a "quick fix" eventually just brings us back to the starting line. This is a book for those of us who believe that one person can make a difference that matters, and that it's essential that we at least try—and try and try again.

This is a book of stories, struggles, solutions, and strategies. Both practical and personal, my hope is that the classroom and school accounts of practicing teachers and leaders will inspire and inform you. Further, my hope is that you will learn specifics for applying effective reading, writing, and thinking practices across the curriculum and come to understand the critical, intersecting role that smart and sensitive professional leadership plays. Conversations with many educators are honestly recounted in their own voices; in a few cases I have used pseudonyms. This is not an all-encompassing book. I have chosen to highlight the stories, factors, data, strategies, struggles, and successes that seem most critical for improving and sustaining schoolwide literacy achievement.

This is a book about joy in teaching and learning. Although we educators will continue to be bombarded by new initiatives and constraints—pressures such as unwieldy standards, complex performance evaluations, value-added data analysis, high-stakes testing, and more—it *is* still possible and necessary to find joy in what we do and to pass on that joy to our students. We must! As I was completing this book, an impassioned parent whom I encountered at an airport told me this:

> My daughter is about to go to college. She has a high grade point average and has taken many advanced placement classes, but she finds no joy in learning in most of her classes. She demonstrates little curiosity or the desire to discover information on her own. All the test prep and focus on standards and testing have leached the fun out of learning. Is she prepared for college? She's passed the courses, but, sadly, she no longer loves to learn.[1]

Her comments reminded me that if we just graduate students who have fulfilled requirements but lack curiosity and a desire and ability to be self-sustaining learners, we have failed. Many of the accounts in this book show how we can rediscover joy in our work for our students and ourselves.

This is a book for all educators—teachers, teacher-leaders, principals, coaches, literacy specialists, interventionists, administrators, curriculum directors—for all of us who want to do a better job in the schools where we work. It is for those of us who believe we have a shared responsibility to educate all children. Ultimately, of course, this is a book for our students and about how we can serve them better and ensure they learn more, no matter where they happen to live or go to school. Change is difficult and challenging, but with a dedicated and highly informed staff, great things can and do happen for students, teachers, and principals. I invite you, my esteemed reader, on the learning journey.

Quick Wins

Seeing ourselves as teacher-leaders and leader-teachers is a new role for most of us and a challenging one. Throughout the text, in addition to stories, strategies, data, and change processes related to literacy and leadership, many "Quick Wins" are provided in the margins of every chapter. These are practical, everyday ideas that are easy to implement, yield quick and reliable results, and help us educators to deal more effectively and efficiently with the nuts and bolts and nuances of effective teaching and leading.

Change is slow, and we need to be able to see some sign of progress and results for our efforts as soon as possible. A quick win promotes confidence that incremental progress is important and that long-term change is possible. As one principal noted, "Recognizing quick wins buys you a lot of money in the bank. The staff knows you're on their side. As a principal, quick wins are really important for moving the school forward."[2]

1

Literacy and Leadership: Change That Matters

Every one of us who deeply cares about equal educational opportunities for all students tries to solve the problem that won't go away: *How do we create schools and classrooms where all students thrive and become highly literate?* Despite reams of research, billions of dollars for new programs, a renewed focus on testing and evaluation, and massive professional development efforts, not much of substance has changed for a large proportion of our students, especially students of poverty and our Latino and black students.

Many of our schools remain segregated, with accompanying inequality of funding, while other schools are resegregating by race and class.[1] Income disparity has become a greater factor than race or color in the achievement gap.[2] As well, the high school dropout rate in our cities is as high as ever, with students who are poor and minority much more likely than their affluent peers to drop out; the number of students of color who get to two- or four-year colleges, let alone earn a degree, is still dismally low; and teachers and principals are caught in the crossfire of who's to blame.[3]

For most of us who are conscientiously doing our jobs as best we can in a demanding culture of cumbersome rules and regulations, exacting standards and evaluations, growing diversity in students' language and culture, increasing class sizes—and working with the often devastating consequences of poverty on students' learning—it's important to stay focused on what we can do. This is no easy matter. It's easy to get discouraged and to blame factors outside our control for our students' low achievement. Despite pockets of success where students in some high-challenge schools beat the odds and become high achievers, placing the blame for low achievement on factors that we cannot control is still quite common.

What keeps me going and encouraged in the complex world of teaching and leading is the core belief that what we do greatly matters, not just to the future of our students, but to our nation and the world. John Dewey wisely stated more than a century ago: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy."[4] What keeps me teaching and leading is the belief that one persistent, knowledgeable, caring person can and must make a difference. A statement by playwright Arthur Miller resonates: "The longer I worked the more certain I felt that as improbable as it might seem, there were moments when an individual conscience was all that could keep a world from falling."[5] At the very least, one person's commitment can change the projected results for one learner; and for that learner, whether it be a child or a teacher, the experience can be life changing. Such stories are woven through this book.

My goal in writing this book is to demystify the process of "getting better," to show through individual and collective stories, actions, practices, demonstrations, and shared experiences in diverse classrooms and schools how worthwhile literacy and leadership change can happen, one person and one school at a time. Highly knowledgeable teachers and leaders can and do create a culture of collaboration, professional learning, and trust that becomes the oxygen that breathes life and hope into learning. We can become energized and excited by the work itself and the results we get. We can replace fear with joy. We can create a whole school and community working together for a greater good. So how does that happen? A bit of background first.

Learning from Teaching and Leading

I am a teacher-learner with 45 years of experience in instructing, assessing, coteaching, coaching, leading, and learning in diverse schools and classrooms. I have been a classroom teacher of most of the elementary grades, a reading specialist, a Reading Recovery teacher, a teacher of children with learning disabilities, a mentor teacher and leader, a literacy coach, a staff developer, a literacy change agent, and an author of many books and resources for educators.

Since 1997 I have been conducting residencies in schools across the United States and in Canada. Most of these schools are diverse; that is, they

serve large populations of students of color, second language learners, and highly transient students. Often these are also schools with large numbers of students from low-income households. I created this residency model when I realized no one was demonstrating for educators—showing them the what, why, and how of effective teaching and assessing practices—beyond the one-day or one-week inservice training sessions on how to use the newest adopted program or implement the latest standards.

In the teaching residencies, most of which occur over the course of a week, I assume responsibility for the classroom; that is, I do the teaching while the classroom teacher and other teachers are released to observe. Using what I call an Optimal Learning Model (described in detail in Chapter 2), I begin with demonstrations and shared experiences before gradually handing over responsibility to the teacher to "try and apply" with my coaching support. Fundamental to the residencies are the daily ongoing professional conversations in which we debrief, question, and discuss our work.

Over many years my perspective has expanded from the classroom to the school and, sometimes, the district, and from a focus on literacy to a focus on *literacy and leadership*. I have learned much about what works, why it works, and what needs to be done to raise and sustain whole-school achievement. Like you, I am still learning. I am passionate about improving the literacy and learning lives of students, as well as for us educators. I continue to rely on tried-and-true practices and to seek and try out new ideas based on my experiences, knowledge about literacy and leadership, collaboration with colleagues, professional reading, reflection, and current and relevant research.

Literacy Insights

My experience working in schools and collaborating and presenting at educational workshops and institutes has taught me that what works best for sustainable, long-term gains are interactive opportunities with school teams. Those teams include teachers and their principal, and, perhaps, coaches and curriculum specialists. Although literacy is the focus, the emphasis is on literacy in the context of whole-school achievement, as well as literacy that is supported by beliefs that align with robust practices and strong leadership. Likewise, I have learned that workshops dedicated solely to literacy—without consideration for whole-school learning—often leave individual teachers and principals satisfied with implementation of specific reading and writing

strategies. However, even when such implementation is successful, the change that occurs is often superficial and limited; a new activity or strategy has been added to the teaching repertoire, but nothing more.

Lasting change depends on an entire staff working together to develop shared beliefs and to align them with research-based practices that move a whole school of learners forward, grade to grade, teacher by teacher. For example, I have observed that most teachers and principals hold and act upon a part-to-whole learning model and a belief system that supports teaching skills and strategies mostly in isolation. Yet teaching isolated skills actually slows down and diminishes the impact of the learning experience. To maximize full learning potential, our most vulnerable students in particular must experience how the skills are relevant and fit into a meaningful and authentic whole. Until a staff develops a beliefs system that contextualizes and integrates the teaching of skills and strategies into meaningful and whole texts, achievement continues to lag. As well, without well-developed and articulated shared beliefs, schools continue to rely too much on programs and resources to determine what to teach rather than seeking out resources that support their well-founded beliefs.

Meeting as a Professional Literacy *Community*

I have also learned that not only must the professional learning be ongoing (scheduled weekly and monthly), but professional conversations have to become infused into the daily life and culture of the school. That is, in addition to Professional *Literacy* Communities (which are discussed in detail in Chapter 6) in both horizontal and vertical teams at and across grade levels, the day-to-day work of the school must include supportive visits and conversations between and among the principal and teachers, observations and coaching by and with teachers and the principal, time for team planning, older students tutoring or coaching younger ones, and an ongoing, free flow of conversation about reading, writing, teaching, leading, assessing, and learning.

From researchers Kathy Au and Taffy Raphael, I have learned the need for building a staircase curriculum with clearly defined and high enough literacy benchmarks at every grade level.[6] Until teachers and principals see what excellence looks like and sounds like at every grade level and can articulate with deep understanding what they are seeing, expectations and progress for students will fall short. Developing benchmarks is a messy, complex task that requires knowledgeable teams to be able to look at student work, determine significant strengths and weaknesses, and set worthwhile goals. Once established, those reading and writing benchmarks need to align and increase in depth from grade to grade. Also, as teachers and leaders we need to ably demonstrate effective literacy practices through thinking aloud as we show how we read, write, speak, listen, analyze, and solve problems across the curriculum. At the same time, we need to establish clear objectives in a manner that is meaningful and relevant and likely to lead to increased student understanding and application.

Perhaps most important to the school change process, I have learned that literacy is not a strong suit for many principals even when they have solid leadership and organizational abilities. For example, I have worked with elementary school principals who were former music teachers, physical education teachers, and high school principals. They did not recognize the key literacy specifics to look for when they went into K–8 classrooms, and many could not effectively assess if the work was at a high enough level. Offering useful feedback and appropriate support to teachers was, consequently, limited. As a result, I created virtual literacy residencies, in the form of a video-based, embedded professional development series, as a companion for principals—as well as coaches and teachers—so that, as a staff, educators could view, discuss, analyze, plan, and apply effective literacy practices to the classroom.[7] Without deep knowledge about literacy, principals remain restricted in their quest to raise reading and writing achievement across a whole school.

Leadership Insights

I didn't know much about leadership when I began demonstration teaching in weeklong residencies. My first residencies involved a multiyear contract with one typical school in a high-needs district. I conducted two weeklong writing residencies each year at the school, one in the fall and one in the spring. The results were humbling. After four years there were

some outstanding teachers of writing, as documented by high achievement scores on state and district tests, along with excellent daily writing. There were some teachers who hadn't moved much, and we still had a couple of resisters who hadn't budged. The principal was a strong leader in the sense that she knew a lot about literacy, entrusted many professional development decisions to a teacher-led team, and held regular professional development meetings. But—and this is a big *but*—she rarely got out of her office to go into classrooms. When I would return each spring, I learned that she didn't know that several teachers weren't teaching writing every day—an agreed-upon school belief—or that teachers hungered for affirmation for taking risks as writing teachers, or that one teacher was actively working against change of any kind. Also critical, because of the principal's absence from classrooms, she was unable to provide the feedback and coaching that are necessary for supporting teachers and staff in their efforts to continually improve.

In truth, not much writing progress was sustained, and looking back, I realize we didn't accomplish much for the amount of time, resources, and energy invested. My background was as a teacher, and instruction is what I knew. In those early residencies, I spent the entire morning instructing and coaching in a primary classroom and the entire afternoon instructing and coaching in an intermediate classroom. Although the principal was required to be part of the residencies, observing and participating with the teachers, I hadn't yet seen the principal as the linchpin in school literacy achievement.

The hardwiring of my thinking changed after I acknowledged and took responsibility for our failure to attain and sustain schoolwide achievement in those first residencies. I came to realize the crucial role of principal-as-literacy-leader in improving school achievement. In all residencies since then, I devote the entire afternoon to mentoring the principal, and that has made a big difference in our short- and long-term outcomes. (See www.regieroutman.org for more information about the residency model.)

I also learned that teachers need encouragement, demonstrations, and responsive coaching to step up to the plate as leaders. Once we teachers learn how to take on a leadership role and embrace it, the culture, collaboration, and achievement in a school change in many positive ways. Professional conversations go on all day long, between and among grade levels; the principal is seen as a supportive partner and not just an

evaluator; teachers are eager to be coached and to share their ideas and questions; trust and respect increase throughout the building, and all students begin to thrive.

On a personal level, I learned that we educators need courage, stamina, and unrelenting determination to lead. A few years ago, in cooperation with Seattle University, I conceived and organized with five esteemed colleagues the first Urgency and School Change Conference. It was a huge challenge and undertaking, which included inviting notable national and international keynote speakers. Never having put on a national conference before, my colleagues and I were learning along the way. Early on in the process, when my husband and I were on vacation and unavailable, one of our most dedicated group members panicked that we would not be able get the number of attendees we needed to cover our considerable expenses. Meaning well, she communicated her fears to other members of our group, and the group concluded we should cancel the conference. Returning from vacation, I learned I had a benevolent but serious mutiny on my hands. I called each group member and spoke at length with each one.

Through persuasion, optimism, and sheer grit, I convinced them all that we would have a highly successful conference—and we did! It didn't matter that I didn't know with certainty if we could pull it off. What mattered was that without collective support and all of us confidently working toward the same worthy goal, we had no chance for success. I learned that people want to be convinced that the work they're doing is important, that their role is crucial, and that they can depend on the designated leader to help them reach the goal line. I also learned that as a leader I had to be willing to live with tension and uncertainty while doing everything possible to see a commitment through and ensure a successful outcome.

I further learned that being a decisive teacher-leader is very different from being a teacher-collaborator. At first I would allow our weekly planning calls to go on too long, listening hard and with an open mind to all viewpoints and trying to get our group to consensus. But often we had no consensus, and although it was difficult at first, I learned to say something like this: "Based on all the viewpoints that have been presented and discussed, it seems like such-and-such makes the most sense, so we're going to do thus-and-so." As a teacher, I was not used to making the final, important decision for a group of peers; my work in schools has always been based on a collaborative mindset and plan; that is, after presenting and discussing

possibilities and options and reviewing data, the teachers and the principal decide the course of action that they believe is best.

So I understand firsthand how risky and hard it is for teachers to move into the unconventional role of teacher-leader—for example, to be willing to stand up and say, "This is what I'm seeing at our school. This is an important issue we all need to talk about, and here's what I'm thinking may be a possible solution." And I know from working with principals how difficult it can be to move into the role of respected instructional teacher and coach when their own literacy knowledge may be limited and their time in classrooms has been mostly dedicated to evaluating teachers. My hope is that this book will be a catalyst for moving the literacy and leadership connection to center stage, jump-starting significant professional conversations, increasing expectations for what's possible for all learners, and accelerating literacy and leadership for whole-school achievement and lasting change.

Prepare People for Worthwhile Change

Change is difficult for most of us, especially when the change is unexpected and pushes the boundaries of our comfort zones. Successful and lasting change depends on solid trust, high expertise by the change agents, excellent resources, sufficient time and practice for adjusting and learning, and a whole host of complex factors. It also depends on taking the time to reflect on where we are and where we want to be. A personal story gives some perspective on the process.

Recently my reliable MacBook Pro, my writing partner and preferred tool for all my composing, stopped functioning well. That is, programs were taking a long time to upload, I had to do more and more "force quits" because of constant freezes, and the constant starts and stops were interfering with my being able to work efficiently. Full disclosure: technology is not my strong suit, although I am constantly improving, thanks to occasional and ongoing help from a specialist, known in Mac lingo as an "Apple genius." Rhett Johnson has been the "genius" who patiently showed me what to do to move forward and who was my personal IT guy for almost a decade. He taught me what I needed to know that I couldn't figure out on my own and boosted my information technology confidence so that I could begin to troubleshoot some issues myself. Over many years, he earned my trust; that is, I came to depend on his ready support when I was confused and scared and knew that he would guide me through the rough patches

with kindness and specific hands-on help, and without passing judgment on my "slow" learning.

However, I was unprepared for what happened when Rhett told me he'd need to "clean up" my desktop and reinstall the operating system and all my programs to get everything working efficiently again. What he didn't tell me was that some programs would look and operate somewhat differently because he was installing the latest versions. When I went back to use my rebuilt computer, I panicked. The familiar was now unfamiliar; the habitual actions and routines I depended on had shifted. I became physically uncomfortable and mentally exhausted trying to adapt to my new computer landscape. Truth be told, I wanted things exactly as they had been before the upgrade. I didn't see the new change as an advantage, and I was peeved at Rhett for making changes without my permission—all of which I told him.

> *Rhett*: "If I'd told you that some of your programs would be different and require some new learning, what would you have said?"
>
> *Regie*: "Keep everything exactly as it is."
>
> *Rhett*: "I want you to try out what you now have. I think you'll find that most of the changes are for the better, and with practice you'll actually see that. However, if you find you're not happy, I'll put everything back the way you had it."

All of us require an IT person—an intelligent, instructive, intentional, and inspiring teacher and leader, a guide-on-the-side to expertly shepherd us through a worthy change process. Because I trusted Rhett, in spite of my discomfort I believed him. In fact, I did come to appreciate and prefer the upgrades. Change and the unknown can be threatening to us, especially if those changes occur in an area where we do not have high confidence. Without colleagues we trust for support, we are unlikely to fully participate in a manner that benefits our students or us.

My recent computer experience caused me to deeply reflect on the school change process. I have organized those thoughts into a reflection sheet for thinking about leading a successful change effort. See "Prepare for Change" as a catalyst and self-reflection tool for sparking conversations and actions in your school and district. (See Appendix A for a related reflection sheet to use for an assessment and planning activity.)

Quick Win

Focus first on those teachers who are ready for needed change and willing to accept and work through the accompanying challenges. Give them full support and resources to be successful. They will positively affect a large percentage of the "wait and see" teachers, which also helps minimize distractions from naysayers.

Prepare for Change

- **Prepare people for the change process.**
  - Be explicit and transparent: here's what we're doing and why.
  - Communicate high and realistic expectations.
  - Allow sufficient time.
  - Maintain continual focus on the K–5, 6–8, 9–12 continuum.
- **Infuse optimism.**
  - Promote a "We can do it" spirit.
  - Be honest about tension in the change process—both the hard parts and the benefits. Infuse creative tension: paint a clear picture of where we are and where we want to be. People need to see the goal.
- **Build in ongoing support and collaboration.**
  - Provide PLCs and ongoing PD focused on literacy and shared learning.
  - Encourage coaching opportunities—release time to observe others and to coteach, attend grade-level meetings, and facilitate common planning times.
  - Make space for failure and problem solving.
  - Allow for sufficient pacing of the learning, including adequate practice time.
- **Establish a schoolwide culture that promotes trust and risk taking.**
  - Recognize people's strengths, interests, and needs.
  - Include personal and professional celebration.
- **Lead the change effort.**
  - As a leader, model your own thinking, questioning, and wonderings publicly.
  - Respect and listen to all viewpoints.
  - Recognize that, at some point, the leader has to decide.
  - Allow sufficient time and emphasis for the change effort.
  - Help people adapt and move forward.
  - Stay focused on the main goals.
- **How do we know we're learning more and getting better?**
  - Assess depth and frequency of professional conversations.
  - Note increase in knowledge and effectiveness of reading and writing practices.
  - Count number of people on board with the change effort.
- **How do we know students are learning more?**
  - Evidence of everyday literacy work and communications, across the curriculum.
  - Evidence of students as self-determining learners.
  - Assessments—formative, interim, summative.
  - Regular review of student work and data together.

In particular, my computer experience and many years of being an educator have convinced me that *without teachers and other stakeholders seeing and understanding the need for change, it is not likely to happen*. One teacher noted that the only reason her school agreed to examine how they were teaching writing in their failing school was fear of an instructional mandate from the district. Initially they did not believe that a whole-school professional development model based on authentic writing for audience and purpose would change anything.

For staff buy-in to occur, establishing the need for change must be agreed upon collaboratively. What is most compelling is to identify the need through data that teachers can see, interpret, understand, and talk about as a whole school. We have to "own" the data so the reason for change becomes transparent and even urgent. As well, the professional development plan must be clear, reasonable, and well thought out, and it must include sustained time for shared learning and application of learning.

Put in Place a Solid Infrastructure

A school's infrastructure is the operating system that provides the expectations and tools for procedures, actions, collaboration, and language that all educators agree to abide by as members of the school community. Worthwhile change is unlikely to take hold without these foundational procedures and structures in place to ensure the effective and efficient functioning of the school. For example, without operating structures, many teachers wind up focusing on nuts and bolts of daily operating procedures, such as the master schedule and lunch.

When we educators are not apprehensive of the uncertainty that ensues from a disorganized or inadequate infrastructure, we can invest our full energies toward improving instruction and learning, and we are more flexible and willing to make worthwhile changes on behalf of our students. An underperforming or dysfunctional school must be made whole before serious learning can take place, and that wholeness starts with getting predictable structures in place.

Chief among these organizational and interactional elements of infrastructure are the following:

- Delineation of roles and responsibilities for teachers and leaders
- Common language and understandings about key literacy concepts and literacy beliefs and practices

Quick Win

Address the most pressing needs of the staff first before addressing curriculum expectations. Those needs might include issues related to recess, buses, lunch, or common planning times. Knowing that as leaders we will immediately work toward resolution of pressing issues builds trust and energy for teaching and learning.

- Data review and response with examination and disaggregation of the data as a foundational step in beginning the school change process
- Schedules and room layouts that promote collaboration, coaching, and interaction between and among teachers and students
- Leadership and literacy groups such as a schoolwide leadership team, grade-level teams, and subject matter teams
- Resources (e.g., curriculum, texts, technology, educational specialists, classroom libraries, tutors) that give instructional support to all students to meet the school's and community's literacy aims
- Norms for optimal functioning and expectations for how we act with each other—organized groups and professional development (especially PLCs—Professional *Literacy* Communities)

Ideally, infrastructure would also include social services and community partnerships.

A strong infrastructure includes not just the tangible structures in the list, but also the intangible, psychological ones, such as these:

- A safe and orderly school culture of high trust and respect for all
- Equal opportunity for all students to learn
- A collective responsibility for the school's students

As well, because the ultimate purpose of a sound infrastructure is increased student learning, an expansive definition of infrastructure must include learning conditions that make student success more likely, such as fairness, some choice, meaningful dialogue, small-group work, daily routines, and well-managed classrooms. High-quality standards and curriculum are necessary, of course, but successful implementation is contingent on infrastructure, which is essential for accelerating and sustaining achievement.

Quick Win

Look at the building layout as a way for improving trust. Do all you can to shape it so people can readily interact and easily run into each other, which encourages spontaneous discussions "on the fly" and builds collaboration and trust.

Focus on Worthwhile Instruction and Learning

Without collective knowledge of how, what, and why to teach and lead, our work to improve our schools will not result in improvement, despite the presence of optimal organizational structures and processes. My teacher research and experience strongly suggest that without adequate literacy and instructional knowledge, change is superficial, at best. Our finest intentions can still keep us marching in place.

For example, for a teacher of writing who has a low level of knowledge, looking at student writing samples and analyzing them can be mostly a waste of valuable time; what the teacher can identify as strengths and needs is severely limited. That is, the focus is primarily on improving the mechanics of writing, such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar, without attention to craft, organization, and style, with the end result that student writing doesn't improve much overall. As well, limited knowledge of teaching reading leads to an overreliance on core programs and teaching skills in isolation. Superficial teaching of reading comprehension and an undervaluing of the role of access to books students can and want to read also results. Scant time is provided for actual reading practice and enjoyment of reading texts, and students remain dependent on teachers, so they often do not become confident, self-directed readers.

Another common, time-consuming practice that may or may not have significance is crafting an inspirational vision, mission, or goals statement. Without a realistic plan of execution K–12, that important vision statement doesn't affect literacy achievement very much. Execution of the vision depends on clear understanding of the vision's goals, highly effective teaching and leading, and ongoing assessment—ideally across the entire district.

Making a worthy vision a reality includes but is not limited to a mindset and actions that value and focus on things such as these:

- Students before standards
- Students viewed as capable of high achievement
- Relevant, engaging, and challenging curriculum
- Common language and curricular understandings
- Celebrations before evaluations
- Formative assessments
- Coherence, consistency, and thoroughness at and across grade levels

One of the helpful things about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is that we get the full literacy picture K–12 in terms of expectations for students, learning outcomes, and samples of student work. This is a huge plus. So is the focus on bigger ideas underpinned by concepts that gradually become more complex but are meant to continually build on each other. Members of a self-sustaining school are keenly aware of the full picture of literacy, what comes before and after their grade level. But this is

atypical for schools. A former middle school principal speaks to the narrow focus that is common in many schools:

> The two years I facilitated a K–12 curriculum committee for our cluster, the high school English department chair headed up the committee and had never seen 1st grade writing. The fluency of those young writers made her head spin! YES! All grade-level teachers should observe what great teachers can do with our youngest students.[8]

The caution is not to rely too much on any set of standards, resources, or research. The only way to achieve a healthy working balance is to become highly knowledgeable. That is, regardless of the curriculum or standards in place, we must know how and why to expertly instruct, assess, and adjust for optimal student learning and engagement. For many of us, our teacher and leadership education and ongoing professional learning have not adequately prepared us to be excellent at our craft.[9] One of the major goals of this book is to increase educators' effectiveness for the purpose of accelerating and enriching student learning.

Establish a Culture of Professional Trust

The importance of trusting relationships in creating a healthy school culture of high achievement cannot be overstated. Without trust, we cannot become a whole school of successful literacy learners, teachers, and leaders. Trust is the glue that makes all things possible. Without it, even worthwhile changes will not stick. Where trust is missing, fear is often present, and fear is a guaranteed antidote to learning. An absence of fear on the part of teachers and students is a prerequisite to raising expectations; feeling safe; having open and honest, healthy debate; and finding joy in learning. It is well-founded trust that allows us to be vulnerable and to take risks even when it may seem scary to do so.

I will never forget when a teacher spoke up for the first time in our after-school Professional *Literacy* Community. Victor was a teacher who struggled mightily with our change process in teaching writing and with moving his students forward. Although he attended every PLC meeting, took notes, cooperated with peers, and seemed attentive, it was impossible to know what he was thinking. That particular day, after he volunteered his thoughts aloud to the whole group, I said, "Victor, it's wonderful to hear your voice. What took you so long?" I have never forgotten his response:

"I've been watching you. I had to be sure I could trust you." It was our third year working together at the school. He was now finally willing to fully participate in our whole-school change process, and his students finally began to make modest gains. The lesson here is that we cannot learn from people we do not trust. It's one of the reasons that it's so important to spend time getting to know people on a personal level before beginning to work with them in earnest.

Although having high knowledge of content and pedagogy is necessary for others to trust us, "We cannot trust even well-intentioned people if they are not good at what they are doing."[10] Being good at what we're doing includes being able to work effectively with *adult* learners. Two other stories come to mind.

A first-time principal replaced a successful and well-liked one in a high-achieving school, and I was surprised by the ongoing difficulties the new principal encountered. She was highly knowledgeable in literacy and educational issues and had published several articles about literacy in respected journals. I found her easy to talk to and assumed she would do well. Yet her first year was fraught with painful issues as several skilled teachers reacted badly to her critical stance when she was observing in classrooms and communicating with the staff. Rather than beginning by noticing what these teachers were doing well, the principal chose to focus on what needed improvement. In so doing, she alienated many teachers and had to work long and hard to regain trust.

Another example is when a highly knowledgeable classroom teacher became her school's literacy coach. Everyone expected that she would excel in her new role, but her critical though well-intentioned stance toward her peers led teachers to stop requesting her coaching support. Eventually, with feedback from others and more experience, she learned how to interact with adults in a highly positive and constructive manner. Although she ultimately became successful and highly regarded as a coach, that initial loss of trust took several years to rebuild.

Professional Trust: What It Is and Why It Matters

I first heard the term *professional trust* described by an excellent principal who stated: "Professional trust means that everyone on staff is committed to all students and trusts that all teachers will do an effective job."[11] That definition infers a trust between and among teachers at all grade

levels and content areas and encompasses the belief that next year's teacher will continue to move students forward in a timely and expert manner. In other words, we all commit to being accountable for making sure our expectations and results for students are high enough, and we continue to build upon students' learning from previous grades and schools within our district. Without professional trust, schoolwide achievement is not possible or sustainable. And it is important to remember that *personal trust precedes professional trust and is its foundation.* Victor, in the aforementioned story, eventually came to believe (though he didn't say it in these exact words): "I can depend on you not to harm me or be dishonest. I can depend on you to accept me. I can trust the words you speak." Once we had that personal trust, professional trust began to develop. Without schoolwide trust, we educators are not likely to say what we don't know, to express our fears, or to speak up even when it's risky but important to do so.

Quick Win

Build professional trust across grade levels. For teachers who don't have a grade-level colleague that they can team with, help them team with a teacher at a different grade level. Kate Gordon, an insightful literacy coach who facilitated such a partnership, noted the win-win situation: "The teacher who felt isolated now feels so accepted in the building, and the other teacher has found the team member that she has been missing for years."

Take Action to Promote Professional Trust

In a professional development meeting at a recent residency, it became apparent that a couple of teachers—one, in particular—were holding the school back. As a whole school, we were examining typical grade-level writing samples from our end-of-the-year writing assessments from the previous school year. The purpose was to note strengths and needs as a school and to see where we were doing well and where we needed to step up the writing instruction. After two years of an intense focus on writing, the school as a whole was making excellent strides as documented by evolving beliefs aligning with more effective practices, everyday writing, interim assessments, district assessments, and application of school-established benchmarks and the Common Core State Standards. In that professional development meeting, we celebrated the specifics of what was going well and then moved to where we could do better. Although it was difficult to do so, in the midst of our guided process of reviewing typical writing samples by grade level, I said something like the following to the staff:

> There's no blame game here, but the writing at one grade level looks very similar to the writing at the adjacent grade level. Unless we have steep enough steps between grade levels, we will not get the high schoolwide achievement we are seeking. So each of us needs to do whatever is necessary to ensure we are doing right by our students at our grade level.

In actuality, a couple of weak teachers were causing some teachers at other grade levels to carry more than their fair share of responsibility for moving students forward as writers. Although the staff was evolving to a high level of personal trust, the lack of movement in one particular grade level was eroding full professional trust. Overall, these were kind and caring teachers, and they were generous in sharing ideas with others and welcoming colleagues into their classrooms, but those carrying the heavier load were also feeling frustrated that not all their peers were moving forward in a timely manner.

After that PD meeting, one teacher in question approached the principal and requested a meeting with me. The teacher stated she knew she needed to do a much better job and wanted help on how to improve. With the principal present and with her prior approval, I said to the teacher:

> You've had enormous support now for more than two years. Your principal, the literacy coach, and staff have bent over backwards to give you materials, demonstration-teach in your classroom, coteach with you, give you constructive feedback orally and in writing, and help you move forward in countless ways. Now it's your turn to do the hard work required to become an excellent writing teacher. Put together a plan for what you're saying you're going to do next, and show it to your principal. Review the videos we've been watching, do the professional reading, go over your notes from past residencies, observe other teachers. It's up to you now.

I believe there comes a time when we must take a tough but fair approach to teachers who don't measure up after they have had excellent mentoring and lots of ongoing opportunities and support over time. Ultimately, it's about all of us truly assuming the responsibility to do our academic and personal best for our students through our deliberate and skillful actions.

In 40-plus years of working in schools, I have found there are few teachers—less than 5 percent—who do not improve. In my experience, it is almost always a rigid personality type that cannot change or does not want to change, but again these are rare instances. Sometimes these are teachers who are just waiting it out, believing and hoping that the present initiative or fad will eventually go away, as previous ones have. I have come to believe that after giving these teachers plentiful support, either they step up to the plate or we kindly find a way to minimize the damage. As leaders

we have a professional responsibility to have hard, honest conversations when necessary. We cannot afford to have any "urgency killers" in our schools—those who fail to be personally accountable for their actions and students' low achievement and who take on the role of resisters, naysayers, or gossipmongers.[12]

A culture of trust provides the emotional infrastructure that makes risk taking and openness to change possible. As I've stated before, nothing sustainable is possible for whole-school literacy achievement without that personal and professional trust. As well, when we try to change too many things at once, we can become overwhelmed and may even wind up taking a step or two backward. When our anxiety goes up, we are reluctant to consider doing things differently. We often see this when a new and ambitious leader steps into an organization. Even if almost everyone acknowledges the need for change, if the leader moves too fast and before trust is established, the best of intentions can backfire. And once trust is broken, it's extremely difficult to reestablish. Here, the adage "slow down to hurry up" is apt; within a trusting and respectful culture, all things are possible and possibilities are limitless.

Patience is a necessity. Sometimes it may feel to us like a teacher is barely moving along; but for someone who has been teaching the same way with limited results for her whole career, even a small change, such as trying to give directions to students more succinctly, feels huge. It can also take time for teachers—even veterans who are unaware of what they don't know—to realize that change is needed and to act upon that knowledge. Noticing and recognizing teachers' efforts so they will be willing to risk making even the smallest change can spur them on. Acknowledging a teacher's comment of "I didn't know that" with a response such as "It takes courage to say that. Thanks for speaking up" encourages the teacher to take a risk. Of course, eventually we need to push for faster change and progress, but in the beginning, celebrating even the smallest victories can pay big dividends.

Quick Win

Find ways to acknowledge all that is good and kind in students, families, colleagues, staff members, and community.

It is also true that we cannot always wait for our colleagues to be ready. To make needed changes that have a positive effect on student learning, we have to rely on those who are ready for change and continue to model and expect the same for those who are reluctant or fearful. For a few colleagues, unfortunately, that readiness never comes. Once we've examined the data and are clear on what's needed to move forward, we have an obligation to move ahead in a thoughtful manner while providing the needed support

that successful and worthy change requires. However, we will not have even an opportunity for successful change if we fail to acknowledge the need for change, establish a solid infrastructure supported by a foundation of trust, and fully commit to the change process.

Become a "Positive Deviant"—A Force for Helpful Change

Over many years, I've observed and concluded that one of the most crucial factors—if not the most decisive one—that influences how well students achieve is the *expectations mindset* that we educators hold. I have never been in a school where expectations by the adults are too high. A school culture of low expectations is so pervasive that often we don't even notice it. Too often we have convinced ourselves that outside factors—not we educators—are responsible for low achievement. Although poverty, crime, inadequate parenting, and a host of society's ills prevent us from reaching and teaching every student every day, we must try—and continue to try and try again—to do right by and for all our students.

In addition to an excuses-and-deficit mentality that reinforces low expectations, a collective lack of a sense of agency often hampers our efforts; that is, many of us don't really believe we have the wherewithal to significantly influence student learning and achievement.[13] In his leading-edge book *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*, prominent physician Atul Gawande describes how the outcomes for some intractable diseases have drastically improved through hard-working, informed individuals who possess a mindset that does not accept failure and who work relentlessly to ensure things get better. Gawande uses the phrase "positive deviants" to refer to those who do whatever it takes to "make a worthy difference" and positively change the status quo. I adopt that term for us as committed educators. In schools where all students are viewed as having high learning potential, there is no blame/complain game. Instead, there is a collective, unwavering will and a collaborative effort to do whatever it takes to guarantee that all our students engage in meaningful learning. That collective will includes becoming as knowledgeable as possible about all aspects of literacy, leadership, and learning. Furthermore, worthwhile and sustainable change requires that we educators hold the belief that we have it within our power to positively influence our students' learning and life destinies. Our first step as educators is to acknowledge that we can do better for those we

Quick Win

Hire teachers who are curious, and assess their willingness to learn more and be part of a continuously learning culture of high expectations and ongoing collaboration. That positive mindset will make it easy for them to quickly adjust.

serve, even when we are teaching under challenging conditions. Despite the presence of real constraints that remain outside our control and that influence our students' ability to engage and achieve, there are actions we can take—individually and collectively—that can positively influence our students' abilities so they enjoy increasing success. First among these is altering our mindset as to what's possible.

Develop a Mindset for High Achievement

Our ability and willingness to see possibilities where adversity and diversity coexist determine how successful we will be as educators. We may care about our students, work hard, and be knowledgeable about literacy, but kindness, hard work, and knowledge do not suffice for raising achievement.

Recently I was at a high-needs school where two 1st grade teachers held very different expectation mindsets about the capability of their students. It was the second month of school, and both teachers had received all their students (with the exception of those new to the school) from the school's only kindergarten teacher, who taught two half-day classes. Although almost all the exiting kindergartners at the school were readers and writers, as confirmed by teacher observation and detailed data, the two 1st grade teachers viewed and perceived this group of students very differently.

One praised the kindergarten teacher and told her how thrilled she was that her job as a 1st grade teacher was much easier because the incoming 1st graders knew all their sounds and letters, formed letters correctly, and could fluently write a page or more of meaningful text. She was excited about how far she would be able to take her students and that she could focus on meaningful content from the start.

The other 1st grade teacher saw her students differently and described their performance as "very low" and as "sweet children with behavior problems." She noted that they could not write well, requiring her to take dictation for some. She was discouraged by how hard she perceived it would be to move her students forward. Although she expressed hope that her students would become better writers and readers, unless she could alter her mindset to a more positive one, her students' literacy progress would be constrained by her low expectations.

The first teacher in this story lived her school life as a positive deviant. She did whatever it took to move her students forward, including advocating for them, partnering her 1st graders with students in an

intermediate-grades class who acted as peer tutors, assessing them day by day to be sure they were moving forward, and refusing to let any political and school issues distract her from a laserlike focus on high literacy achievement for every student. At the end of the school year, most of her 34 students were joyfully reading and writing texts well beyond grade level, as judged by various assessments, including school and district benchmarks and exemplars from the Common Core State Standards, standardized interim writing assessments, everyday reading and writing samples, and student self-assessments. Her high expectations for all children, her sense of agency that she could propel all students forward, and her whole-part-whole, meaningful instruction made excellent results likely, and she got them.

The second teacher worked diligently and had good intentions, but at the end of the school year her students' reading and writing competencies, as a whole, lagged far behind the first teacher's. In spite of her participation in embedded, high-level professional development dedicated to improving student learning, collaborative work across grade levels to develop shared literacy knowledge, a strong and supportive principal and literacy coach, and a school culture of increasing trust, the second teacher was unable to sufficiently modify her expectations mindset in a manner that would help most of her students soar. Her beliefs and low expectations about what her students could and could not accomplish remained static.

So, how do we get all staff members to alter their views for what's possible for students? It's no easy matter, and it starts with changing the culture of the school. By *culture* I mean the trust levels, collaboration, sense of agency and urgency, shared beliefs, knowledge level, feedback, and infrastructure that support high-level, embedded professional development aimed at improving reading and writing achievement across the curriculum, each and every day. By *culture* I also mean determining what kind of change is worthwhile and what mindsets, structures, systems, resources, and practices we need to keep in place, what we need to modify, and what we need to replace. By *culture* I further mean creating a whole-school community that works together to increase effectiveness, efficiency, and enjoyment for teachers, leaders, students, and their families. Much of this book centers on achieving a culture that supports optimal learning.

I have thought a lot about why the second teacher never became part of the school culture of high expectations and why she seemed to lack any

sense of urgency. I believe, above all, she lacked the determination, commitment, and curiosity to learn more, which require welcoming divergent conversations and thought as well as openness to doing things differently. Lacking those characteristics herself, she was unable to instill them in her students and thus thwarted their optimal progress.

At a minimum, the interview and hiring process for new teachers and leaders must include, as a crucial component, finding out what the applicant is curious about, is studying, is thinking about, and is hoping to learn. Responses to the questions "What are you reading professionally?" "Who are some of your favorite authors?" "What are you wondering about?" and "What are you passionate about?" can tell us volumes.

Quick Win

Give a potential hire a professional article to read; then base part of the interview on discussing that noteworthy article, which will give some insight into whether the person is a good fit for the school's learning culture.

Teach with a Sense of Agency and Urgency

A sense of complacency is the air we breathe in too many schools—our low- and high-achieving schools alike. In low-performing schools, we too often accept the fact that students are routinely two and three years below grade level. In high-performing schools where many students may come from affluent backgrounds, teachers often take credit for students' high test scores that may more realistically be the result of the wide literacy and learning opportunities families have provided to their children.

A story comes to mind. When teaching in a residency focused on reading, I was struck by the engagement and curiosity of a 1st grade student who enthusiastically responded to a nonfiction story about dogs of war that I had just read aloud to the class. (The book is *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine and a Miracle*.[14]) His participation at all levels—answering thoughtful questions, understanding vocabulary, and contributing to our shared writing summary—stood out among his peers. So I was surprised and disheartened to learn and to observe that this boy was the oldest and most struggling reader in the classroom. Because he did not yet know his letters and sounds, he was pulled out to work with an interventionist 30 minutes a day, during which he was drilled with flash cards and unavailable to benefit from high-quality classroom instruction in language arts.

As an alternative I suggested using vocabulary and pictures from the nonfiction book he appeared to relish—words and phrases such as *Humvee*, *war zone*, and *stray dog*—to teach him his letters and sounds, which I believed he would learn rapidly if meaning was attached to them. I remember feeling outrage that this intelligent boy was not receiving the support

that would propel him forward. His teachers were kind and caring, but they did not yet see this student as highly capable. Moreover, their actions did not indicate an urgent need to hold themselves accountable for his lack of progress or to do whatever it took to ensure his immediate and fast progress as a reader.

Believing we have the wherewithal to increase achievement for all students is a big shift for many of us. As already stated but important enough to be restated, a lack of agency on the part of adults—that is, the belief that we cannot influence the learning and achievement of some of our students—is one of the major factors holding these students back.[15] Additionally, teaching with a sense of urgency is required.

Teaching with a sense of urgency means making every minute count. When teaching with urgency, we teach with a sense of relevancy and purpose, keep most demonstration lessons to 10 to 15 minutes, adjust our pacing, assess as we teach, and constantly rethink and revise as we go along. Teaching with urgency does not mean rushing through lessons; it does mean being mindful that how and what we are teaching in every instructional moment is worthwhile for our students. *We're not in a race to the top; we're on a journey to excellence.*

Ask Uncommon Questions

The questions we ask ourselves while planning, teaching, assessing, and reflecting show what we value, and ultimately those questions play a large part in determining our effectiveness as educators and "positive deviants." By effectiveness, I mean the beneficial and lasting influence and effect we are able to have on student engagement, learning, and achievement. That effectiveness does not come about through strict adherence to a particular learning target, standard, program, or set of criteria. The latter are important, of course, and can help us become more intentional and specific in our teaching and leading. However, the learning targets and objectives must not supersede our primary emphasis: the mental and emotional well-being and growth of our students. I believe that highly effective teachers ask different questions than typical teachers do—before, during, and after instruction. In fact, we are constantly questioning everything we do: *Why does this matter? Could it be otherwise? What other considerations are necessary? Is there a better way? How could we do this differently and more effectively?*

Before I teach literacy in any school residency, I spend many hours thinking and planning, on my own and with the teacher in whose classroom I will be demonstrating and coaching. Although I always have the curriculum, standards, and specific learning goals in mind, the students take precedence over those, and my primary planning questions to myself run along these lines:

- What topic, actions, and activities will fully engage the hearts and minds of the students so they will invest their full energies?
- What outstanding and relevant literature and resources will inspire and inform the students through rich language and ideas from various authors, genres, and formats?
- How can we best support all students to move their learning forward and encourage their success and independence?
- How will we know students are understanding and learning what we are teaching?

Some administrators and teachers complain they get "push back" if they try to deviate in any way from standard protocols and required resources. However, focusing on particular standards, learning targets, and outcomes does not guarantee a positive effect on student learning. As one principal from Wisconsin wrote to me:

> Requiring teachers to rigidly adhere to a prescribed protocol for instruction can leach the life out of what makes learning so enjoyable: the interactions between teacher-student, student-student, and classroom-global community.[16]

Here's an example of what I'm talking about, taken from my work with the members of a K–12 school team who were committed to doing better for their mostly underachieving students in a large urban district. The leaders and teachers proudly described how anyone could walk into any classroom and know immediately by what's posted on the walls exactly what standard and learning outcome every teacher was focused on for that day. In particular, they took great pride in the standardization they had achieved; that is, all teachers at a grade level were working on the same goal. However, when I asked, "How is that working for you? Is student achievement going up?" they responded that a large proportion of students were still one to three years below grade level.

And here's another example. Recently an elementary coordinator wrote me of her concern that the district leadership expects teachers to know exactly what the learning target is for every learning task and to have those posted. Yet the same teachers do not know what knowledge their students possess or lack, and the teachers are not highly skilled in assessing their students or in knowing how to give effective feedback. This all too common practice of following procedures, standards, and resources without question, which can sound good and look impressive on the surface, may do considerable harm to students by taking the focus away from their most pressing learning needs and interests. We have only so much time, and we must apportion it wisely.

There is a big difference between posting clear learning goals (perhaps as "I Can" statements) and simply copying something from the district pacing guide. Learning goals can be linked to district and state standards, as well as student needs, but we educators have to be both knowledgeable and articulate to use learning goals so they actually help students learn more.

Keep in mind that in our role as positive deviants—that is, as productive teachers and leaders who put students at the forefront of all we do—we must advocate for and behave with a mindset that puts students first. That means asking questions that are uncommon for some of us as educators.

Uncommon Questions

- What do we really need to be doing, saying, and providing to ensure students understand, value, and can apply the academic expectations we set for and with them?
- What are we doing, saying, and providing that may work against optimal student learning?
- Are we emphasizing the wrong end goal(s)?
- Are we overly focused or overly invested in a structure, process, standards, or program?
- What might we do differently?
- What else do we need to consider?
- Are we succumbing to "group think" and failing to consider important alternatives?
- Does our instructional emphasis build on the student's self-esteem, transferable knowledge, and self-monitoring abilities?

Instead of thinking first about naming and posting learning targets, think first about making worthwhile learning visible, explicit, and comprehensible for students. We can, in fact, teach our colleagues and ourselves how to think, question, and teach more responsively. We must ensure that we are doing enough excellent demonstrating for learners—for example, through our explanations and thinking aloud, which show exactly what we expect students to be trying and applying in their own work. As well, we must provide sufficient shared experiences and guided practice if we expect learners to be successful. Once we as educators are highly knowledgeable and are clear and articulate in our instructional intentions, posted learning targets can become somewhat redundant. At this point, we can find out what students are learning and why they are learning it by asking them.

Become a Teacher Who Also Leads

At schools where teachers are expert at their craft and students are high achieving, those teachers are also, almost always, teacher-leaders. To be clear, we are not talking about those teachers whose goal is to move into administration. A teacher-leader's primary job is still as a teacher of a group of students, but the job goes far beyond the classroom walls. It means seeing ourselves as concerned for all the school's students and being willing to share what we know, coach and coteach, help implement new initiatives, partner with teachers who may be at a different grade level, set up unconventional learning situations, speak up honestly in meetings when it's important to do so, and keep the good of the whole school uppermost in all our actions. Much of this book is about becoming a highly effective teacher who also leads, which is a necessity for raising and sustaining achievement schoolwide.

Becoming a teacher-leader requires extensive knowledge of relevant research and best practices and how to apply that knowledge in the classroom, superb skills in communicating and working with others, a mindset that puts students before standards, plus courage and stamina. That is, these are teachers who are willing to share what they know, collaborate with others, stretch their thinking, stand by their principles, advocate for their students, and see themselves and their work as part of a larger school purpose. Becoming a teacher-leader also means being willing to step outside of our comfort zones and outside of our classrooms. It means questioning the status quo when necessary, checking the research to ensure it applies to

Quick Win

Dress for success. The way we present ourselves sends a message to students and the public about our pride in our profession.

our specific population and context, looking carefully at the data and using them to improve learning, and suggesting and advocating for alternative approaches when necessary.

It can be difficult to take a stand on established policies that are harmful to the teaching profession and ultimately to our students' achievement and well-being, but sometimes there's no one else to do it, and we have to at least try: Jonathan Kozol wisely states, "Look for battles big enough to matter but, at the same time, small enough to win some realistic victories."[17] We'll never know if we can win an important battle or a small victory unless we confront the issues in a constructive manner and offer alternative actions.

An example of a courageous teacher-leader is Lori Johnson. When her district became overinvested in an evaluation program that was yielding numerical data that were not useful for improving reading instruction, she lobbied her superintendent, led the formation of a district advisory group, and caused the district to take another look at the program that was taking too much time away from instruction and that did not support what Lori knew and practiced regarding excellent reading instruction. She did all this in a highly professional and positive manner while recognizing and affirming district leaders and their intentions. The result of her unrelenting efforts—which was possible in no small measure because of the ongoing moral support of her principal, DeAnna Finger—was that her school was granted flexibility with how to use the required assessment. Like many teacher-leaders, Lori was a reluctant one. She did not start out seeking to be a leader. She felt compelled to speak out and take action because of what she believed—from years of professional study and teaching experience—her students most needed to develop as readers.

Here's another example. Sharlline Markwardt is an English language development (ELD) teacher who took a stand and lobbied her district for a "push-in" model rather than the traditional "pull-out" model for second-language learners. She invited her principal and the district's director of curriculum and instruction to observe firsthand the results she was getting when she supported her English language learners (ELLs) in the regular classroom, and those results included impressive data.

Working closely with the classroom teacher, Sharlline differentiated the curriculum all students were receiving to scaffold the learning for her English language learners. Not only was she then able to change the model

at her own school, she also convinced the district to change the model in every school. She offered and followed through on mentoring ELD teachers in other buildings by inviting them to observe her teach, debrief through professional conversations, and follow up with districtwide professional development. Sharlline notes:

> I knew something had to change, that what we were doing wasn't working. In looking at the whole-part-whole model, I realized that teaching ELD in a pull-out was about teaching just parts and not wholes. A classroom teacher took a chance on me and my idea of doing a language assessment on her whole class. What we found was that all of the non-ELD students scored somewhere on the language acquisition range, so we took the plunge, with administration support, and implemented ELD within content area teaching. The results have proven to be not just positive for ELD students, but the non-ELD students' writing improved as well.[18]

Becoming a teacher-leader also means speaking with clarity and knowledge, and communicating and collaborating in a respectful and effective manner. The teacher-leader who is able to be a force for positive change strives for a mindset of "we-we," not "we-they," and recognizes that all of us want students to succeed even if our means to that success differ. It is our close relationships with other teachers and administrators that give us our political power to make change. I have never seen a teacher who maintains low expectations for students or poor relationships with peers and administrators rise to become a leader who makes a positive and lasting impact in a school or district.

Perhaps most of all, we need to stay focused on solutions, stay upbeat (become a positive deviant), see our colleagues positively and as having good intentions, continue to generously share ideas, and listen to others with an open mind. Laurie Espenel is a teacher-leader who possesses all of these characteristics, along with being an excellent communicator. Having a strong relationship with her principal enabled Laurie to serve as a positive buffer and an advocate for both the principal and the teachers. In speaking of her role as teacher-leader, Laurie says:

> It's a role I come by naturally. I've never been afraid to bring up an issue that needed resolution. Also, the staff trusted me. I knew the feelings of much of the staff. Taking on the role of teacher-leader opened the

> principal's door wider so there's better communication. The principal was more accessible because teachers' concerns were addressed in a way that made them feel they were being heard.[19]

Become a Leader Who Also Knows Literacy

My biggest learning lesson in working in diverse schools for the last two decades is this: *Teachers have to be leaders, and leaders have to know literacy.* I learned this lesson the hard way when, after focusing all my residency efforts on working with teachers, I realized the principal often did not know how to fully support teachers—what to look for in the reading-writing classroom, what to say to teachers to help them move forward, and most of all, what highly effective literacy instruction, learning, and assessment entailed. Although I had been demonstrating effective reading and writing practices with students in classrooms and then coaching teachers to take on that responsibility, I realized that nothing of significance would be sustained schoolwide until the principal could assume the role of effective literacy coach as part of being a strong leader.

A principal cannot bring a whole school of teachers from good to great without becoming a highly knowledgeable literacy expert, as well as a trusted leader and colleague. Without the principal knowing what's most important to look for and listen for in the literacy classroom and how to give honest and useful feedback and support to teachers, teachers and students won't improve much in ways that matter.

Barb Ide, a former elementary and middle school principal who works as a school improvement coach in a high-poverty urban school, is an excellent example of a principal who greatly increased her effectiveness when she expanded her leadership role to include literacy. She talks about how that increased knowledge—along with learning how to better support, trust, and communicate with her staff—changed things for teachers, students, the school, and herself as a leader:

> A new leader going into a successful school needs to observe and pay attention to the established culture. I followed this protocol in my first two schools, and it was a good decision! At my next school, I was sent in as a change agent and made a mess of things because I was accustomed to collaboration and trust. When some of the faculty met me with suspicion and resistance, I reacted with a heavy hand. I made a

rookie mistake by hearing only the contrary minority rather than seeking out the innovators and prospective leaders. After a couple of difficult years I shifted to a focus on literacy and delighted in our staff as we combined effort for positive change. An indicator of progress over the seven years at that school was the number of teacher-leaders who emerged, due in part to the literacy experience anchored in a culture of trust. Nearly a dozen future principals, assistant principals, and literacy coaches spread their wings with first-hand knowledge of the power of curriculum teams (PLCs) guided by a schoolwide focus.[20]

Sustainable, worthwhile change in our schools is not easy, but it is possible and necessary if we are to serve our students well and fairly. A premise of this book is that it is all of us working together as smart, inquiring, trusting educators with our primary focus on deep knowledge of literacy, instruction, assessment, and learning—not the latest standards, curriculum, evaluations, or tests—that matters most. For the high achievement, engagement, and joy in learning we all seek, not just for our students but for ourselves as well, it *is* within our power to make a worthy and lasting difference.

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About the Author

Regie Routman is a longtime teacher, author, and speaker who is committed to improving the literacy and learning lives of children, especially those in high-challenge schools. Her current work involves weeklong school residencies where she demonstrates effective reading and writing practices in diverse classrooms, coaches teachers and principals, and facilitates ongoing professional conversations, all as a catalyst for sustainable, whole-school change. Regie's experiences as a classroom teacher, Reading Recovery teacher, language arts coach, and staff developer led her to see schoolwide collaboration and high-level, professional learning as a necessity for increasing and sustaining achievement. As a result, Regie created the residency model where she mentors an entire school to increase engagement, enjoyment, and literacy achievement for all learners. Because the number of residencies she is able to do is limited, she created the video-based and job-embedded literacy series *Regie Routman in Residence: Transforming Our Teaching*.

Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success is Regie's first book on school change and is based on the actions, practices, and priorities that lead to schoolwide literacy success. Drawing from her residency experiences, the text specifies how and why teachers and principals must collaborate as knowledgeable partners, that is, as joint experts in both leadership and literacy in a trusting school culture that becomes a Professional *Literacy* Community. Regie's earlier publications,

especially her *Essentials* series—*Reading Essentials, Writing Essentials, and Teaching Essentials*—continue to support educators to teach reading and writing more effectively and joyfully. See www.regieroutman.org for more information on Regie's books and resources, blog, professional development offerings, Teacher Recognition Grant, and contact information. Regie lives in Seattle, WA, with her husband Frank.