

SIMPLY **BETTER**

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Introduction

I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.

Overwhelming and discouraging—that’s sometimes how this business of improving schools can feel.

I spend a good deal of my time at education conferences, where I’ve logged many hours in exhibit halls. At most big shows, these halls fill warehouse-sized rooms and feature row upon row of vendors selling new gadgets, programs, tools, you name it—a veritable cornucopia of education solutions.

I often see educators roaming the aisles of these halls with furrowed brows, their heads swimming with new ideas from the sessions they just attended, now being confronted with a bazaar of products and programs, all claiming to deliver results for kids. Add to that the countless articles, reports, books, and blogs, and the whole overload of information can be overwhelming, if not entirely distracting.

In 2009, I was part of a team of researchers at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), a nonprofit education research and development organization with funding from the Stupski Foundation, that launched a major, yearlong effort to capture what’s currently known about

what it takes to ensure the success of all students, and especially of children of color living in poverty.

Hoping to wrap our arms and minds around all that has been written, presented at conferences, and offered to educators in the name of improving student outcomes, we eventually identified and read more than 1,000 studies and reports related to seven components of school systems and the learning needs of underserved students. After reviewing this body of knowledge, we compiled eight reports, which provide the underpinnings of this publication. Each report addressed one of the following topics: college readiness, curriculum, pedagogy, student supports, assessment, leadership, system diagnostics, and underserved students. (The reports are available as free downloads at www.changetheodds.org.)

While synthesizing and compiling this research, we arrived at an important conclusion: to improve the chances of life success for all children, educators and policymakers don't need *more* guidance; in fact, they may actually need *less*.

Distilling Simplicity from Complexity

In some ways, the countless studies, articles, and reports on education create a phenomenon similar to what radio broadcasters refer to as signal-to-noise ratio—a measure of how much the true signal, be it Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* or late-night talk radio, is corrupted by static. Like the crackles and whistles that break up the signal of a faraway AM radio station, the preponderance of data in the field of education may drown out the big ideas—the key underlying principles of what's most important when it comes to improving the odds of life success for all students. Rather than add to the noise, this book attempts to sort through the complexity of schooling to identify a handful of “first principles” that, when intentionally and effectively applied, transform school systems.

The goal here is not to simplify complexity into vapid platitudes. I'm mindful of the observation of H. L. Mencken, who once wrote, “There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.” Instead, the goal is to work through the complexity to identify key principles at the heart of what it takes to help all students become successful learners.

How the Odds Are Stacked Against Underserved Youth

The odds of success are significantly stacked against many students, especially those born into poverty. One measure of how well our education system is serving students is graduation rates, the statistics of which paint a grim picture:

- Nationwide, nearly one-third of all students fail to graduate with their peers (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).
- One-third of those who do graduate are ill prepared for either employment or college (Greene & Foster, 2003).
- Only one-half of black, Latino, and Native American students graduate on time from high school (Greene & Foster, 2003).
- In some urban communities, graduation rates are as low as 17 percent (Neuman, 2009).

For individuals, the consequence of these failures can be catastrophic:

- The poverty rate of families headed by dropouts is more than twice that of families headed by high school graduates (Baum & Payea, 2004).
- A dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a high school graduate and nearly 20 times as likely as a college graduate (Harlow, 2003).
- Over a lifetime, dropouts earn an average of \$260,000 less than high school graduates (Rouse, 2005).
- The life expectancy for high school dropouts is five years shorter than for college graduates (Commission to Build a Healthier America, 2009).

From Beating the Odds to Changing Them

Like Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem's Children Zone, we believe the goal of U.S. educators shouldn't be simply to help a few kids beat the odds and make it out of poverty, but rather to *change the odds*, and to do it for all kids (Tough, 2009). The question is: What will it take?

Others have, of course, attempted to tackle this question. In the book *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk: Seven Essential Principles of Educational Programs that Break the Cycle of Poverty* (2009), University of Michigan researcher Susan Neuman identifies several early childhood programs, out-of-school interventions, and community support systems that have been shown to mitigate the effects of grinding poverty on student achievement. However, her book focuses on interventions that come from *outside* the school, primarily because she feels that schools have not been as willing to change and adapt to student needs as community-based organizations (*Changing the Odds for Students at Risk*, 2008).

Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success attempts to build on Neuman's work to include interventions that schools *must* perform to change the odds for students. The underlying premise is that schools should be at the center of any effort to meet the needs of all students, if for no other reason than they are where millions of U.S. students are currently educated. These students need better opportunities *today*. Thus, the approach of this book is to determine principles and practices that can be employed *right now* to change the odds for students.

Building on *What Works* to Identify *What Matters Most*

In this book, I attempt to go beyond merely identifying “what works.” The problem is not that too few programs “work,” but rather that too many only *appear* to “work.” Several years ago, Wade Carpenter, a professor at Berry College in Georgia, counted 361 “good ideas” that had appeared during a 10-year period in the pages of the respected *Phi Delta Kappan* (Carpenter, 2000). After reviewing the preponderance of seemingly good ideas (which included, among others, whole-language instruction, performance assessment, block scheduling, looping, and de-tracking), Carpenter wrote the following:

It's embarrassing. It really is. Not to mention depressing. These are only a few of the “good ideas” that were discussed in the pages of the *Kappan*—silver bullets that would enhance, reform, and even save American education. . . . It is embarrassing because all these “good ideas” have produced very limited gains. It is depressing because nearly all of them really were good ideas. But the results of all this research and publication have been less than impressive. (p. 383)

In preparing this book, I've also been mindful of what New Zealand researcher John Hattie calls the “hinge point” effect size of $d = .40$ (Hattie, 2009). An effect size is the measure of the strength or overall impact of a program or intervention being studied. Hattie writes that an effect size of $.40$ is strong enough for educators to see “real-world change” in student achievement (p. 17). It's also the point at which an innovation exceeds the average effect size of teacher influence on student achievement—that is, between $d = .20$ and $d = .40$. Using this metric, many programs and approaches that appear to work are actually no more effective than average classroom teachers left to their own devices. By using Hattie's “hinge point” as a cutoff, this book attempts to identify *what matters most*—those programs and approaches that stand clearly above the rest.

Finding the Touchstones

Over the years, McREL has conducted several meta-analyses and research syntheses to identify what works in a variety of areas—from instruction to extended learning, from school to district leadership. This research has appeared in such publications as *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), *School District Leadership that Works* (Waters & Marzano, 2006), and *District Leadership that Works* (Marzano & Waters, 2009). These studies provide a foundation for this book as they do, in fact, call out many practices that meet Hattie's “hinge point” test.

By looking at what works in classrooms, schools, and after-school programs, as well as what works for at-risk students and school and district leaders, this book aims to identify key or “first” principles for changing the odds for students. Educators would do well to continually return to these “touchstones” to gauge the merit and value of their endeavors.

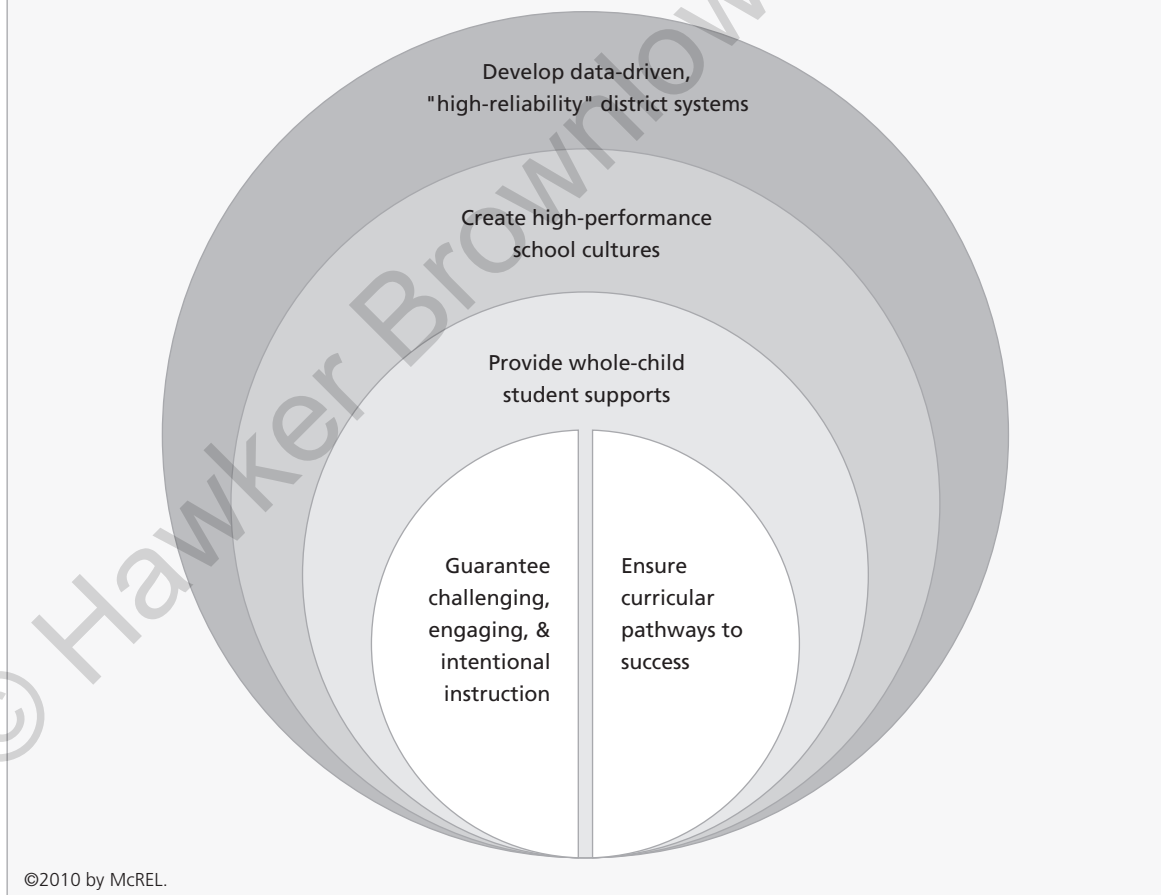
The What Matters Most framework (see Figure I.1) identifies those areas that, when addressed properly, are most likely to have positive effects on student success. Stated differently, they are high-leverage, high-payoff areas for school systems. Briefly, the components of the framework, which are described in more detail in the following chapters, are as follows:

- **Guarantee challenging, engaging, and intentional instruction.** At the core of effective systems are teachers who challenge students, develop

positive relationships with them, and are intentional in their use of a broad repertoire of teaching strategies.

- **Ensure curricular pathways to success.** High-performing systems guarantee that all students in every classroom, no matter what their aspirations, are provided with both *challenging* and *personalized* learning experiences that prepare them for life success.
- **Provide whole-child student supports.** To help students meet high expectations, school systems need to provide cognitive, emotional, and learning supports to address a variety of student-level factors that

Figure I.1
What Matters Most Framework



are crucial to their success, such as home environment, background knowledge, and motivation.

- **Create high-performance school cultures.** Effective schools ensure high-quality learning experiences in every classroom. At the same time, they develop a culture of high expectations for learning and behavior, which is an even more powerful predictor of student success than socioeconomic status.
- **Develop data-driven, high-reliability district systems.** High-performing school systems put data systems and processes in place to ensure consistently high-quality learning experiences for all students and follow established procedures for providing real-time responses to student failures.

These five areas may seem unremarkable. Indeed, one might look at them and say there's nothing terribly new about any of them. After all, haven't we known the importance of something like good instruction for decades? Perhaps, but what *is* remarkable is the powerful effect that getting all five of these areas right could have for students. For years, educators and policymakers have hoped to find some new approach, program, or innovation that can "solve" the challenge of how to prepare all students for life success. Yet the real solution appears to lie not in something *new*, but rather in a relentless focus on doing effectively what stands out from decades of research about how to improve student outcomes. In other words, changing the odds for student success does not require a wholesale reinvention of the system, or some new technology-driven innovation, but rather a clear focus on simply doing what we've learned about what matters most for raising student achievement.

If It's So Simple, Why Isn't It Being Done?

If we've known what works for so long, why haven't we put it into action? Here are some possible reasons why.

Urgent but Unimportant Concerns Distract from What's Most Important

Sometimes, even the most dedicated, thoughtful, and passionate educators can find themselves tinkering at the margins—wrangling over such things

as what color to paint the school library or the merits of a lice awareness campaign—rather than focusing on what’s most important.

At other times, educators may implement so many new programs that it’s hard to sort through them all to know which ones work, and to what end. Several years ago, a team of Chicago researchers led by Tony Bryk encountered a school where the principal, in an effort to do what she thought was best for students, relentlessly pursued every new funding opportunity and program she could find (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998). She sent her teachers to nearly every professional conference in the city, and filled her school with computers, books, and other tools. Bryk and his colleagues noted that “all of the activity and ‘stuff’” even impressed a local TV reporter, “much as a Christmas tree laden with ornaments dazzles a child.” In the end, though, none of the “stuff” did what it was supposed to do—raise student achievement. Efforts were fragmented and incoherent, and did little to “strengthen . . . the core of the school.” Though the teachers were consumed with activity, they were not focusing on what matters most. Returning to the Christmas tree metaphor, the researchers concluded that “it was as if the branches of the tree sagged from the weight of all the ornaments, while the trunk was withering and the roots were dry” (p. 115). Being clear about what matters most can help schools become more conscious and thoughtful about each new ornament they place on the tree. Educators should ask themselves: Is this program or initiative worth it? Does it address a critical need, or will it just create a shiny new distraction?

Right Focus + Poor Execution = Limited Effects

As the old saying goes, the devil lies in the details. Some ideas, though simple in *principle*, can be extremely difficult in *practice*. (The Golden Rule comes to mind.) Indeed, researchers often have trouble discerning whether programs are ineffective due to faulty design or poor implementation.

Education systems are hardly alone in their struggles to do what “everyone knows” needs to be done. We might just as easily ask why automakers, airline companies, and banks do not apply the “open secrets” of success in their industries. Consider airlines: It’s an open secret that, to remain one of the most profitable airlines in the nation, Southwest Airlines buys only one type of airplane to minimize training time and maintenance costs, does not