CREATING a CULTURE
— of —
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Part I: The Game

No one would ever mistake education for a game. The stakes are too high and the outcomes are too critical to be compared to simple fun and entertainment. However, when it comes to metaphors, nothing comes close to conveying the complexity, organization, relationships, and goal orientation of sports. And after much deliberation and contemplation, we've chosen the sports metaphor as the mode through which we share our work.

Launching this exploration is Part I, where we set the stage for the game itself. This introduction outlines four key ideas that compel us forth.

In Chapter 1, we present a pretty straightforward argument: our schools and education system are underperforming, and we can do better—and improving teacher quality is the key.

Going deeper, Chapter 2 reveals our thesis: the difference between mediocrity and excellence is our ability to engage in rigorous self-reflection about the task at hand, so in order to improve our educational outcomes, we must focus on building the reflective capacity of our teachers. We also introduce and explain the first of two important tools—the Reflective Cycle—to show how teachers reflect and to guide this process.

In Chapter 3, we update a classic tool—the Continuum of Self-Reflection—first published in *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success* (Hall & Simeral, 2008) to provide a playbook for developing our teachers as reflective practitioners. The Continuum of Self-Reflection is a two-pronged

tool that helps capacity-builders (administrators, coaches, and teacher-leaders) identify how their teachers reflect and suggests strategies for supporting their growth.

Finally, in Chapter 4, we introduce the idea of a culture of reflective practice. Before we, as capacity-builders, can begin the exciting work of capacity-building, we must prepare the environment for this work. The first four fundamentals of a culture of reflective practice provide a blueprint for establishing a culture and building readiness for reflection, while the final three fundamentals share the collaborative, feedback, and coaching elements of deep and lasting capacity-building.

Play ball!

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Demystifying the Surest Path to Student Learning

One hundred percent. Is there any other number in education—or in any element of life, for that matter—that is more important? Wouldn't our communities breathe a little easier if 100 percent of our citizens were well educated, employed, and contributing members to society? Shouldn't our school districts aim for 100 percent of their students graduating prepared for college, careers, and life? Don't schools and teachers want 100 percent of their students to master 100 percent of key learning outcomes? We can guarantee you that all parents want 100 percent of their children to succeed, achieve, and meet 100 percent of their potential.

Unfortunately, educators have long been loath to promote goals that include the lofty, audacious figure of 100 percent. In the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (commonly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB), that very goal was set for 2014 student achievement rates. That "finish line" has come and gone, as has NCLB, but the effects are lasting: setting a goal of 100 percent proficiency has shifted the focus to *all* students, which by definition includes and emphasizes *each* and *every* individual student. Here's a mission—a philosophy, at least—we can all get behind.

In a lot of contexts, numbers other than 100 percent have been deemed sufficient. Many schools, districts, and teachers set goals to have 90 percent,

80 percent, 60 percent, or even a smaller percentage of students reach the proficiency level on academic achievement indexes. When would 90 percent be sufficient? When referring to the number of words one spells correctly on a spelling test? The number of students adequately supporting a thesis statement in an essay? The percentage of parents or families representing their children during parent-teacher conference week? The number of free throws made in a basketball game? The high school graduation rate?

Let's extend our thinking beyond education, just for argument's sake. Would 90 percent meet our needs for on-time flight arrivals? How about crash-free flights? Successful medical procedures? Accurate billing from your credit card company? The success rate of your own bungee jumps off the Rio Grande Bridge in Taos, New Mexico? Heavens, no!

One hundred percent is the *only* number that matters.

As educators, we engage every day in the most noble, the most impactful, and the most important act known to humankind: teaching. Ensuring the success, the learning, and the development of our community's young people is not a task to take lightly and certainly isn't one worthy of shucking off one-tenth of our clientele. We can, and we must, reach every single child, every single moment: 100 percent.

Are We There Yet?

Over the past two decades or so, we (the collective *we*) have pummeled our schools, lambasted our teachers, skewered our principals, and—worst of all—heaped anxiety upon piles of torment and stress on our kids—all in the name of explaining our collective lack of academic success and growth. We could look at PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) or TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) scores (both of which—along with other international measures—are available for your scrutiny at https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international/ide), homegrown assessment results such as the NAEP (National Assessment

of Educational Progress, commonly known as the Nation's Report Card), or the reams of standardized test score data we've so eagerly collected to know this: it ain't pretty.

Let's just cut to the chase, shall we? If you teach, lead, or work in a school system—or if you're a member of our human society—you're quite aware that our schools are not functioning up to their potential. Never mind the unattainable (albeit admirable) goal of 100 percent across the board. The painful and plentiful reality is this: our students are not achieving as they could. We are stumbling along this path, churning out masses of young adults toting a remarkable disparity of knowledge, skills, and readiness for the *real* world, including some who are ill-prepared to the point of embarrassment. That's the bad news. Here's the good news: there's *plenty* of room for improvement.

Have We Gone Mad?

Because we have yet to encounter anyone who claims, "Our schools are fine; just leave them alone," it's safe to say there's consensus about the urgent need to improve our educational outputs. And now, for the $620 billion question (that was the total expenditure for public elementary and secondary schools in the United States in 2012–13, according to the most recent NCES data, available at http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66): *How* do we improve our schools? And where should we allocate our funds to get the biggest bang for the buck?

As a profession, and as a society, we decry the lack of funding in education. We lament the shortfalls, pummel our legislators, plead for increased spending, and even sue the states for their failure to adequately fund basic education needs (National Educational Access Network, available at http://schoolfunding.info/litigation/litigation.php3). To a certain extent, this is justifiable outrage. Then again, what mechanisms are in place to monitor and evaluate our allocation of the funds we *do* receive and the impact of those expenditures? Are we wise stewards of public

funds? Or are we simply asking for more money to spend on doing more of the same thing, sowing the seeds of the status quo? Do we even know what to do to improve?

In our ardent quest to unravel the mysteries of effective teaching, we have swung from one end of that puckish educational pendulum to the other. Over and over again, we've embraced a "new" approach, banishing our previous practices as "old school" and claiming innovation as the key to improvement. We have sought the strategies that lead to higher levels of student learning, hoping that replicating them in our classrooms will produce better results. The consequence of this pursuit, noble as it may appear, is a frightful adherence to lock-step actions, teachers following a prescribed checklist monitored by zealous principals; and when the test results come back stagnant, we switch to a different set of instructional techniques, again hoping for different outcomes.

Plan A

What does the research say about what successful, effective schools and districts are doing to make their gains? How do high-performing schools and districts allocate their precious resources (time, money, energy, and personnel)? If we are going to focus on the educational growth and development of our students, where do we start? Where do we direct our energy in order to address education's public accountability charge? The answer is startlingly simple. We must improve teacher quality, because *teacher quality—and quality instruction—is the number-one determinant of student success.*

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Now, now. Before you cast this claim into the cacophony of prominent voices all across the educational landscape singing the same song,