



# Leading High-Performance School Systems

## *Lessons from the World's Best*

Foreword.....	v
Preface .....	ix
Chapter 1: Systems That Work, Systems That Don't, and No Systems at All.....	1
Chapter 2: The Architecture of High-Performing Education Systems: An Overview.....	21
Chapter 3: It Begins with a Vision That Becomes a Plan .....	45
Chapter 4: Powerful, Coherent Instructional Systems— Wrapped in Credentials That Make Sense.....	67
Chapter 5: A Surplus of Highly Qualified Teachers? Surely You're Joking! .....	115
Chapter 6: Reorganizing Schools Around Highly Qualified Professional Teachers .....	139
Chapter 7: Equity: How to Close the Gap When the Bar Is Very High .....	170
Chapter 8: Leading the Revolution: From the Bottom, the Middle, and the Top.....	190
Bibliography .....	213
Index .....	219
About the Author.....	225
About the Sponsoring Organizations .....	227

# 1

## Systems That Work, Systems That Don't, and No Systems at All

---

Looked at one way, the American education system doesn't look like a system at all. Looked at another way, it looks like a system designed to fail. What does a system designed to get better and better look like? Why is it so hard to develop these kinds of healthy, high-performance education systems in the United States? We will explore these questions in this chapter and highlight the crucial role of leadership in designing better systems.

We explained in the Preface that this is a book about building high-performance education systems, and we used Elon Musk's rockets as an example of a high-performance system, pointing to the way that all of the components of his rockets must be designed to work in harmony with all the other parts in order for the rockets to perform to their exacting specifications. In the next chapter, we will help you understand how the top performers have divided their education systems into their component subsystems and the strategic decisions that have driven the design of each of those component systems.

Before we do that, we will help you see how systems work as a whole in education. We want you to get into the habit of "systems thinking." In this chapter, we will show you why we think the "American problem," if you will, is a compound of two problems: collections of components that were never designed to work in harness at all (leaving us, properly speaking, with no system at all) and poorly designed

systems that undermine the very purpose for which they were created. To illustrate how our system actually works—or doesn't—we will begin with the story of Harriet Minor. Hers could be the story of any good, experienced, caring teacher in a large school district in many parts of the United States over the past 20 years.

## Harriet Minor's Story

Harriet Minor had been teaching at Jefferson Elementary School in Springfield for 15 years. She is a good teacher, highly respected by her colleagues and principal, and a favorite of parents and her students. She enjoys her job and is proud of her accomplishments. But lately she has been thinking about hanging it up and leaving teaching.

Jefferson just got another principal, the fourth in six years. Each one had arrived with a new idea, a new project, a new intervention. The first was convinced that parent involvement was the key to success. The second was a phonics devotee. The third was as far over to the whole-language side of the great reading debate as one could be and was into technology. The fourth thought technology was just a fad. But it wasn't just the principals. One year a couple of teachers who were close to the principal would go to some workshop and come back with a new way to group students, and the principal would shower resources on that method. The next year that program would fall out of favor, but then someone in the central office would become enamored of a new program on data and data analysis. Last year, the superintendent had ordered all the elementary school teachers to attend a workshop series on the new flavor of the month. Those who did not call in sick sat through the workshops, collected their pay, and went back to what they had been doing, secure in the knowledge that this, too, would pass.

All these interventions were laid down one after another by various teachers, principals, central office administrators, and superintendents. None of them were designed to build on what went before, but none of them ever went away, either. They were like the evanescent enthusiasms of teenagers, intense but fleeting and often conflicting.

As Harriet thought about the endless series of silver-bullet solutions that never solved anything, she mused that no one seemed to get any credit for following through on someone else's initiatives. All the kudos seemed to go to the person who came up with a new idea, not the one who put in the work needed to make the old ideas work.

But her school and district, she realized, were now not the only sources of silver-bullet solutions. Harriet had been a teacher for decades, and her mother and grandmother had been teachers before her. Harriet knew that 60 years earlier the federal government had played hardly any role in public education and, at least in her state, the state department of education had little to say about how students were educated in the district schools. In Harriet's grandmother's day, there were no state standards for students, no required state tests or exams, no approved textbooks, no accountability system. There were hardly any requirements for becoming a teacher. The district set its own graduation standards. Most of the money to run the schools was raised by the community and spent in the community. Teachers pretty much decided for themselves what to teach and how to teach it. In most communities, teachers had more education than the average citizen, and they were looked up to. The term *dropout* was unknown, because it was common for most students to leave school when they reached the end of compulsory education, and the basic literacy that most students left with was enough to get a good middle-class job if you were white.

But all of that had begun to change in the 1960s, when President Lyndon Johnson got Congress to pass the big civil rights laws and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which created an expanding set of categorical programs for specific groups of students who had not been served well. The big special education program got its start soon after that, too. The federal government had gotten involved because Congress did not trust state and local governments to do the right thing when it came to civil rights, minorities, special education students, or students from low-income families, so it created wave after wave of programs, each targeted at one of these groups, each with its own funding flows, each with its own regulations and, in many cases,

each with its own administrative arm in the district central office and its own funded teachers in the schools, reporting right up this structure through the central office, through the state to the federal government. The state then implemented its own versions of these categorical programs. The district set up its own offices within the central office to administer these programs. Eventually, between them, the state and the federal government paid for more of the school operations in Harriet's community than the local taxpayers did. And with the money, came layer after layer of silver-bullet solutions.

Then, in 2001, Congress, disgusted that it had approved hundreds of billions of dollars in aid to disadvantaged students—with little, it seemed, to show for it—got angry at the teachers and their unions and decided to hold the schools accountable for the performance of the students for whom the money had been given. Schools could be closed, principals cashiered, and teachers fired if the students did not perform. When President Barack Obama took office, many educators thought he might overturn this tough accountability policy and the testing regime on which it was based, but he doubled down on it. Instead of holding the schools accountable, he held the teachers directly accountable, with their jobs on the line if students' performance did not improve at the rate specified by the legislation. In 2010, President Obama's secretary of education in effect pressured the states to adopt the new Common Core State Standards for student achievement for English and mathematics literacy that the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association had developed earlier.

Harriet read a lot about the standards and liked them. She thought they were a strong step in the right direction and would help her students develop the critical-thinking skills and reading and writing abilities they would need to be successful. She also liked the emphasis on problem solving and conceptual understanding in mathematics. Though teaching the Common Core would be more difficult than what she had been doing, it embraced what she had always thought was most important in teaching. It was the right thing to do.

But Harriet's positive feelings about the standards evaporated quickly.

The state decided to use the old basic skills tests to assess student progress against the standards, even though the tests were not designed to assess the kinds of achievement that the standards called for. Harriet was livid. She had signed up for the standards because they represented the kind of goals she believed in. But now not only her students' performance but also her own performance would be measured against tests she loathed, ones that focused mainly on memorization of facts and procedures, not at all what she admired in the new standards.

Then Harriet discovered that there was no money to buy new texts and materials, even though the old ones were written before the new standards were released and were virtually useless for helping her students meet the new standards. Even worse, when the textbook publishers rushed new ones into print with little stickers on them saying they were aligned with the new standards, Harriet saw right away that they were just the same old wine in new bottles.

When Harriet asked her principal if the central office would give her and a few other experienced teachers in the school the time they would need to work together to create materials aligned with the new standards, she was told there was no money for that. If any new materials were needed, the teachers would have to create them on their own time.

What Harriet loved about the new standards was their reach, the clear intention of their creators to go for a deep understanding of the material and for the ability to apply that understanding to things that really matter. But it was clear to her that many of her colleagues didn't have that kind of understanding of the subjects they were teaching, nor did they have the skills and knowledge needed to teach those subjects at the level anticipated by the standards' authors. She assumed the state and federal leaders who had created and mandated these standards understood that and would provide the extensive training needed so that teachers could implement them effectively. But, when the inevitable workshops were scheduled to "teach the standards," Harriet discovered that the people delivering the workshops could do no more than explain what was in the standards. The standards might call for students to understand why the rules of arithmetic work the way they do, so that

they could grasp algebra when they got to it, but that would never happen, Harriet knew, if their teachers did not understand why those rules work. Now, she realized, those teachers would never understand it, and neither would their students.

By this time, it had become clear to Harriet that the new standards were a very bad joke. When the new accountability plan was announced, Harriet could not believe her ears. The legislation required grade-by-grade testing only in English literacy and mathematics. But all the teachers in her school were supposed to be held accountable for student performance, using the mandated tests. How could that be? Well, the social studies teachers and science teachers and media teachers and even the physical education teachers would be held accountable for the students' performance on the tests of English literacy and mathematics! It might be reasonable to hold the mathematics teachers responsible for students' mathematics achievement, but holding the social studies teachers responsible for mathematics achievement . . . Harriet was astounded.

That was not the worst of it. Harriet started hearing that some of the most admired teachers in the district, teachers who had won prestigious awards for their teaching, were being fired because their students were not making sufficient progress on the accountability tests. This seemed bizarre to her. But it turned out to be true. These were first-rate teachers who had chosen to work in schools serving the students who needed them the most: students who lived in deep poverty; those who were often homeless or, when not homeless, were being evicted from their homes and moving from school to school every few months; and those who might have one parent in jail and another on drugs. The newspapers were on the accountability bandwagon now and demanding the names of teachers whose students were performing poorly. The tests did not detect the names of the valiant teachers who bailed their students out of jail, found a homeless child a place to stay, or went to bat for the child who had just been beaten up by a gang in a new neighborhood. Nor did the reporters seem to care that the tests that showed a teacher to be a genius one year found the same teacher to be a dud the next.

Harriet could see that the best teachers in the inner-city schools were bailing fast, and she was at a loss for how this sort of accountability system was helping inner-city kids.

The last straw came when her principal demanded that she and the other teachers administer miniversions of the end-of-year basic skills accountability tests at the end of every month to make sure that their students were making enough progress to do well on the end-of-year tests. The principal made it clear that she expected the teachers to study the basic skills tests carefully and make sure their students got plenty of drill and practice on those tests all week, every week. All she seemed to care about was that the students did well on those tests, the same tests that Harriet had always despised. It was not long before the parents discovered what was going on and became outraged at a school that had turned into nothing but a test-prep system.

Well, maybe that was the next-to-last straw. The thing that really caused Harriet to throw in the towel was the way the so-called education reformers were talking about teachers. And about principals, too.

The so-called reformers were fond of pointing out that principals were always giving teachers great evaluations, even when the students' scores on standardized tests were abysmal. This seemed to the so-called reformers to be evidence of collusion to protect incompetents. The way to address this problem, they said, was to bypass the principals and for the system simply to get rid of the teachers whose students performed the worst on the standardized tests. This is what had happened to Harriet's friends, the award-winning teachers in the inner-city schools who were fired.

Harriet had been good friends with the principal of her school for many years, long before she had become principal of this school. She knew that this woman cared deeply about the students and wanted all of them to have the best possible teachers. But she also knew that her inner-city district could not afford to pay what the suburbs paid their teachers. Even worse, whenever her district raised its salaries to get better teachers, the suburbs just raised theirs. When her district managed to develop really skilled teachers, the suburbs always raided them. Her principal did not hand out good evaluations because she was lazy



or colluding with anyone. She handed them out because she knew it would be hard to get anyone better, so there was no point in alienating teachers who were going to be on her staff for a long time.

Harriet quit in 2015. Over the preceding 10 years, applications to the teachers colleges in her state had fallen 60 percent, pretty much the average for states in her part of the country. The teachers she knew and admired were telling their own children not to go into teaching. The typical school superintendent in her state was serving just about two and a half years, about the same length of time that the average state commissioner of education was serving. Harriet had heard somewhere that these were the shortest times of tenure that had ever been recorded for people in those positions. It was hard for Harriet to imagine how this was going to end well.

Harriet is an invention. But her experiences and feelings are not. The story just told is actually multiple stories. The first is a parable about the never-ending reform of the American education system conceived of as an endless fusillade of silver-bullet solutions shot at a random selection of targets. The second is about the reform of the American education system as a strangely coherent but self-defeating “vicious circle” of reform that leads inexorably not to high performance but rather to steadily worsening performance. Let’s tease out these stories.

## **Lesson One: Real System Reform Wins Over “Silver Bullet” Reform Every Time**

*When education reform conceived of as a “fusillade of silver bullets” is compared to education reform conceived of as system reform, real system reform wins, hands down.*

Harriet’s story begins with a series of principals, each of whom rejected or simply ignored the priorities and strategies embraced by the previous principals and superintendents. None of the leaders were around very long. None of these strategies were systemic. Each of them addressed a particular problem, sometimes the same problems addressed by the previous leaders, sometimes very different ones. Either