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Foreword

The six principles which form the foundation of the second edition of Alan M. Blankstein’s *Failure Is Not an Option* are as solid and comprehensive as when they were formulated in the first edition. It is no accident that these premises have proven correct as change stories and successes have unfolded since the first edition six years ago. This powerful book addresses all of the elements that are absolutely necessary for effective and enduring educational reform. Blankstein takes the key pieces of strategic reform ideas and weaves them into a coherent whole. In the first four chapters, he clearly and convincingly establishes the foundation for courageous action—why failure is not an option, why courageous leadership is crucial and what it looks like, 10 common routes to failure and what to do about them, and why and how professional learning communities are central to successful reform.

Having established the philosophical and values base for reform, Blankstein proceeds to tackle the very difficult how-to questions. He does this through the six principles, with a chapter focusing on each. The six principles again cover the waterfront of effective reform: mission, achievement for all, collaborative teaching, using data, active engagement of the community, and sustained leadership for continuous improvement.

In addition to getting the content right and doing it in a comprehensive way, *Failure Is Not an Option* is chock-full of interesting vignettes, case studies, and tested techniques for addressing difficult issues. The techniques in the Resources are invaluable in their own right. Particularly powerful is how Blankstein provides both sides of all key points. He describes what is wrong, and then *what right looks like*. He systematically poses challenging questions, and then proceeds to outline solutions to each challenge. All throughout the book there are ideas and strategies for pursuing practical applications to perplexing problems.

In this second edition, with the experience of others using the six principles, several other contributions are now apparent. In new cases we see the *synergy* of the principles in action within schools, within districts, and

across districts. There is more precision in peer-to-peer observation in coaching and assessment for learning that shows how the principles get operationalized up close. We see how the ideas play out in diverse settings. And the critical question of how to sustain the focus on success is tackled. On top of this, the second edition has many more practical, rich resources to assist the readers in applying the ideas in their own context.

Failure Is Not an Option is a deeply passionate call to arms, combined with an entire arsenal of information—from the worlds of both research and classroom practice—to enable the reader to take systematic, continuous, and effective action. As we grapple with the new opportunities in the Obama/Duncan “race-to-the-top” era, this book is essential reading because it is simultaneously inspiring and practical.

—Michael Fullan
University of Toronto

CASE EXAMPLE



The Power of an Idea: A New Start

When Shawn Smiley first became principal, he told his new staff that failure was not an option. They could no longer say they were failing and “so what?” Teacher and leadership team member Diane Pelkington recalls how she reacted: “We had to find a way to succeed, and he’s not going to accept failure in our building any more. Just hearing that and having a leader who believes, truly believes that, helps everybody else get on board. It gives us that same desire to make our building a strong building once again. I was so impressed. I had not heard that before—‘failure is not an option’—so I *clearly* remember that moment.”

This determination on the part of the principal and school staff to assure success across the board had significant consequences as can be seen by the scores for current reading levels below.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Quarter 1</i>	<i>Quarter 4</i>
Kindergarten	51%	97%
First	80%	84%
Second	46%	67%
Third	61%	75%
Fourth	48%	63%
Fifth	48%	70%

Source: Personal communication, Shawn Smiley, Nancy Noel, Susan Lothamer, Chris Rasor, Diane Pelkington, Colleen Kobi-Berger, Lydia Beer, Marcy Bestard, & Deb Hyatt, 2009.

Note: These were percentages of students per grade level reading at grade level; K–3 were measured from DIBELS and 4 and 5 were taken from Scholastic Reading Inventory (measured in LEXILE).

The idea that no child will fail is still relatively new:

The old mission was about providing access for all to basic education and access for a relatively elite to university education. . . . The new mission for schools is to achieve 90–95 percent success. (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006, pp. 1–2)

For more than a decade, a growing confluence of research and practice has indicated that our best hope for success in schools is through the creation of PLCs (Bryk, Easton, Kerbow, Rollow, & Sebring, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Fullan, 1993; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996; McLaughlin, 1993; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). This is very good news indeed. It seems to provide clear direction for educators who are contemplating substantive school change. At the same time, it invites as many questions as it answers.

- What is a learning community in practice?
- What are the key elements for making such a community succeed?
- How do I know if I have succeeded in creating such a community?
- What are my next steps in the process of creating and sustaining a learning community?

There are many definitions of a *professional learning community*. We include a summary of these, as well as a brief background on the rise of interest in this area, in the next section.

Trust and the Learning Community

How do you know if you are working in a professional learning community? Consider (with a smile) these possible indicators:

You know you are in a learning community when . . .

- You enter the school building and are warmly greeted by a parent volunteer.
- You see articles with highlights all over them posted in the teacher lounge.
- You are actually *happy* to see another teacher or an administrator visiting your classroom to observe instruction.
- Colleagues stop by your home on the weekend . . . to talk about work!
- Enhancing student learning is the primary focus of team meetings, and best practices for enhancing their achievement drive decisions.
- SMART goals (see Chapter 5) are set, regularly assessed, and achieved.
- Last year's worst behaved fourth grader is tutoring a second grader this year.
- During professional development days, the *last* rows of seats are the ones left empty.
- The principal says, "I don't know. Let's research this together."
- When the final bell rings, the teachers and principal aren't the first ones out the door!