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CHAPTER ONE

The New Mission for School Systems

As societies have confronted the challenges brought about by globalization and new technologies, especially information technologies, the critical importance of education has become obvious to all. Political leaders have taken an unprecedented interest in public education and in charting a new mission for school systems.

The old mission was about providing access for all to basic education and access for a relatively small elite to university education. It is easy to underestimate the achievements of education systems in developed countries in securing universal education for all to the age of 15 or 16 years and in creating university places for between 20 and 50 percent of the student population. This achievement stands as one of the great social advances of the last century.

The new mission takes over where the old one left off. It is to get *all* students to meet high standards of education and to provide them with a lifelong education that does not have the built-in obsolescence of so much old-style curriculum but that equips them to be lifelong learners.

The benefits of having a good education are widely recognized, and the personal benefits are still a great incentive to individuals to do well. What are now much clearer are the substantial economic and social costs associated with *failure* to learn and failure to achieve one's full potential.

The authors have been working on the question of what is needed for the next radical breakthrough in education and have made

The answer, then, is closer to home than we think. We have known since the early writings of the father of the study of modern organizations, Peter Drucker, that the failure to exploit existing innovations is more widespread than the failure to innovate in the first place. According to Abrahamson (2004), we are better off to “start with what you have lying around in the corporate [system] basement” (p. 26).

Education reform is at a stage where many of the components of successful large-scale reform are evident in schools’ collective basements. One half of the solution is to seek out and identify the critical elements that need to be in place; the other half is combining them creatively. This is not simply a job of alignment, but rather one of establishing dynamic connectivity among the core elements.

We start in this chapter by identifying the three critical components that need to be at the core of any Breakthrough system.

THE TRIPLE P CORE COMPONENTS

Figure 2.1 displays the three core elements that form our Breakthrough system: personalization, precision, and professional learning. In this chapter, we establish their nature and importance, and in subsequent chapters, we provide more operational detail.

Figure 2.1 The Triple P Core Components



We believe that many classrooms are already on the brink and ready to make the shift and that the conditions are right for rapid adoption. The “tipping point” will soon be reached, and in a matter of years, no school or school system will remain unaffected by this next phase of school reform, the phase in which the last frontier is reached and classroom instruction is transformed.

THE CURRENT MODEL

Why *instruction* and not teaching? Teaching is what teachers do, whereas what goes on in classrooms is very much an interaction between students, teachers, and resources in specific but constantly changing contexts in which the teacher is only one, albeit the most important, player. We therefore prefer the term *instruction*, which Cohen, Raudenbush, and Ball (2003) define as follows:

Instruction consists of interactions among teachers and students around content, in environments . . . “Interaction” refers to no particular form of discourse but to teachers’ and students’ connected work, extending through days, weeks, and months. Instruction evolves as tasks develop and lead to others, as students’ engagement and understanding waxes and wanes, and organization changes. Instruction is a stream, not an event, and it flows in and draws on environments—including other teachers and students, school leaders, parents, professionals, local districts, state agencies, and test and text publishers. (p. 122)

What this definition highlights is the enormously complex, interactive nature of instruction and the multilayered makeup of the influences that affect it. It also points to one of the great paradoxes in education. On the one hand, classroom instruction is one of the most widely experienced and public of activities, one that virtually every man, woman, and child can talk about from personal experience. After all, schools and schooling are ubiquitous, and teachers constitute one of the largest occupational groups in the workforce. On the other hand, classroom instruction remains a tangled web that has proven largely impenetrable to researchers. As a consequence, the knowledge base about classroom instruction is surprisingly tenuous, and in much policy discussion about school reform, the classroom remains something of a “black box.”