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LEARNING PLACES

A FIELD GUIDE FOR IMPROVING
THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOLING



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ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

What does our current level of organizational competence tell us about promising areas for growth?

BIG IDEA — SUCCESS IS INTENTIONAL.

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.

— Calvin Coolidge

This book is about empowering people to constantly reframe the essential elements of their school for the better. It provides two powerful forces for doing this kind of work: one is **conceptual** and the other is **methodological**. In this chapter, we introduce these two forces as essential guides to action, and we use them throughout the book. As you learn to use these forces to create adaptive strategies for coming together in positive ways, you will move closer to creating a place of learning that is self-reliant and sustainable, a place of learning that you helped shape.

If we have learned anything from the major school reform initiatives of the last decade it is this: Schools improve from the inside out. What this means is that change efforts must be personalized to fit the context of the individual school if they are to have a chance to take root. Successful schools know this lesson. They come together all the time to identify what's good about the school and celebrate it. As part of this celebration, they make plans to alter those parts of the school that keep them from achieving their goals. Because successful schools are ever vigilant to “look round” and pay attention to what they are really like inside, they are better prepared to improve what they do.

MINDSHIFT: *Schoolwide factors shape and condition individual classroom success.*

In this Field Guide we invite you to look at your school in new ways. Provided here are templates and strategies that focus attention upon how your school is organized for learning. Used appropriately, these templates and strategies get right to the heart of the change process: deciding and acting together.

A successful school improves because it is always learning. It is a Learning Place. *Learning Places*, because they are full of interesting and challenging opportunities to enrich our understanding of the world, like the world, are also places that are fluid. In *Learning Places* success is, by design, more prevalent than failure. Teachers and students are validated and affirmed every day for the quality of their work and neither are afraid to make mistakes. All people in the school community share in success.

A thousand good intentions are no match for a positive act.

— Allen Wheelis

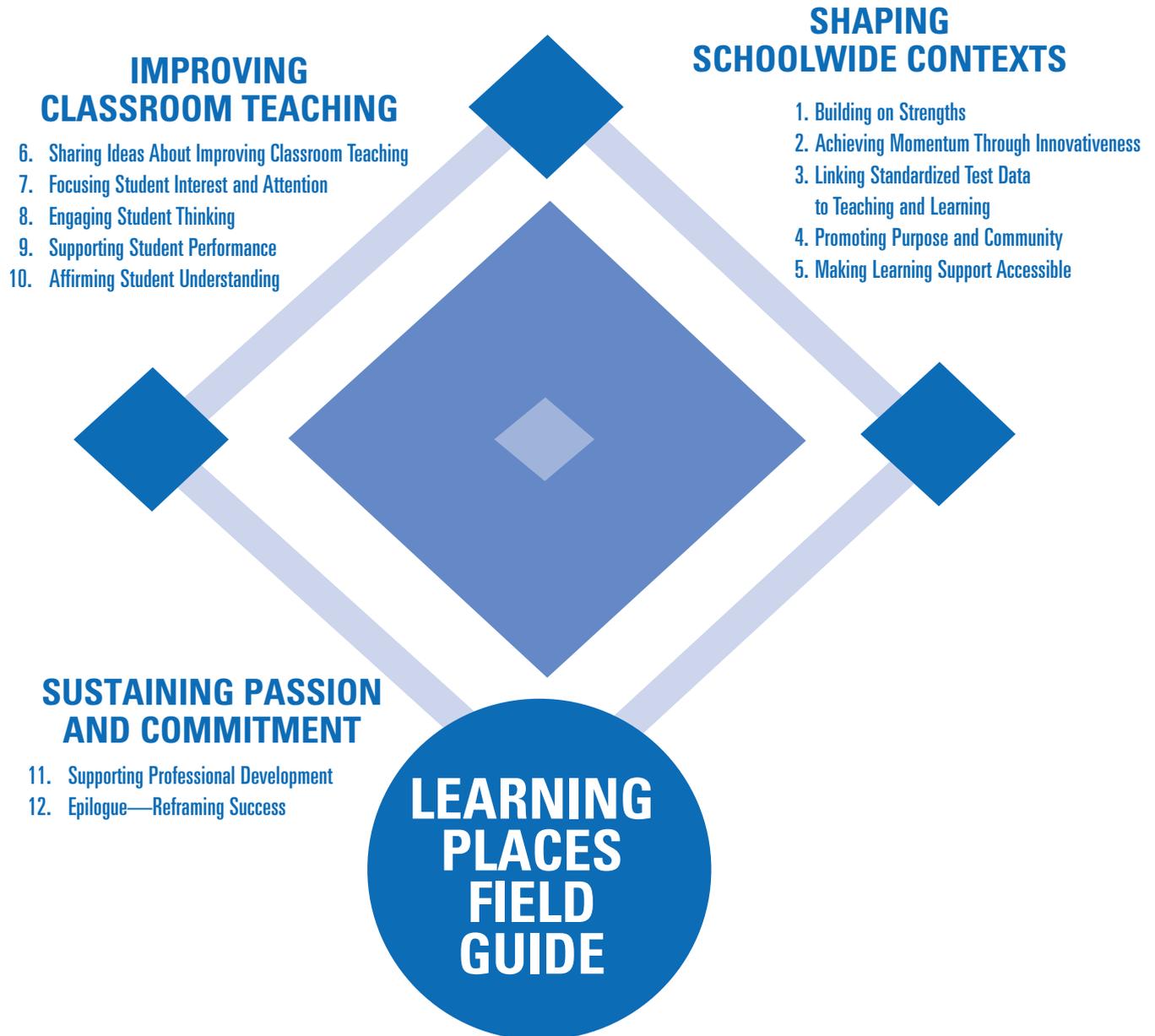
The problem is that most schools are not the learning places we just described. But they could be! In this Field Guide we will provide the conceptual and practical tools that you need to make your school come alive.

This Field Guide provides tools and activities that lead the reader through several phases of dialogue, self-assessment, collaborative decision making, and experimentation with what matters most in terms of becoming a learning place. In a combination of activities involving inquiry and action, this Field Guide seeks to make this journey both purposeful and professionally gratifying.

Figure 1 displays the conceptual mind-set that will be required. It involves focusing on three themes and their synergistic interrelatedness. Essentially moving to new and better schools involves Shaping Schoolwide Contexts, Radically Improving Classroom Teaching, and Sustaining Passion and Commitment. The 12 chapters indicated in Figure 1 pursue in depth these three crucial components of success.

Figure 1

STUDENT SUCCESS



Concepts and tools are flip sides of the same Learning Places coin. Concepts without tools are great ideas with no means of getting anywhere. Tools without ideas are mindless. Together they bring out the best in each other. Good tools force greater clarity of thinking; good ideas sharpen the precision of tools, and more than that, they indicate the conditions under which the tool should and should not be used.

Become the lesson you would teach; be what you would have others become.

—Adapted from Gandhi

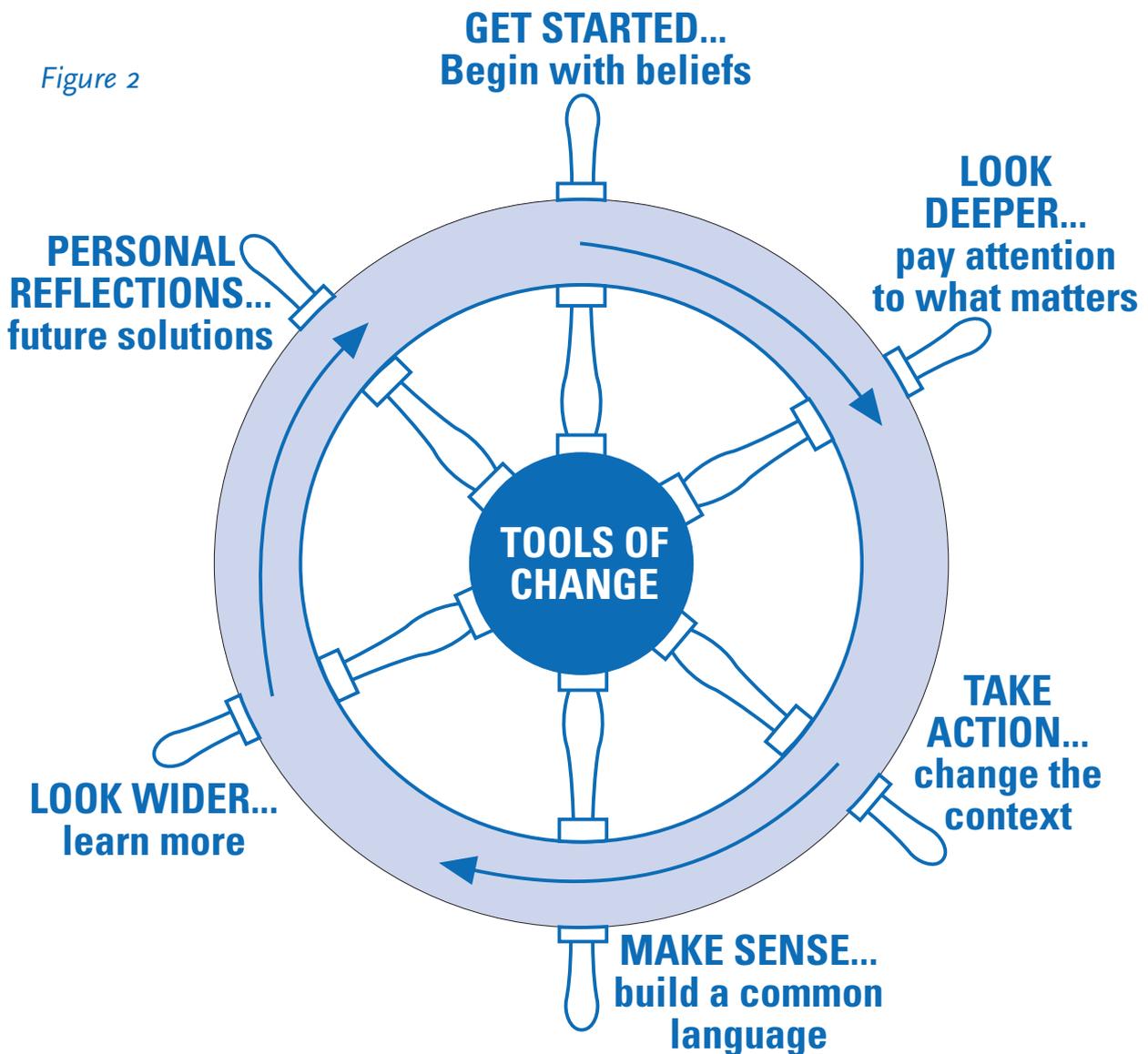
TOOLS OF CHANGE

The components of this Field Guide are designed to move the reader through a series of linked activities that progress from discussion to observation, to action planning and beyond.

Concepts, even powerful ones like those in Figure 1, do not develop on their own. For this journey, you will also need critical methods for moving to new destinations. We call these Tools of Change (see Figure 2).

Using these tools, each chapter mediates a specific inquiry about the subtle and not-so-subtle attributes of schools that significantly impact student learning and provide wonderful, challenging, and fulfilling work opportunities for teachers and principals.

Figure 2



GETTING STARTED is made actionable in this Field Guide using a **READ REACT SHARE** learning strategy. Readers are encouraged to preview the questions, make personal notes, discuss these notes with colleagues, and then form collective judgments that “jump-start” purposeful action. These judgments are the nuts and bolts of shared purpose. This dialogue is intended to “set the stage” for meaningful inquiry, which is the next step in the improvement process.

In schools where the challenges are formidable (and those where they are not), there is a temptation to skip the Getting Started phase of school reform. The familiar “been there; done that” is the killer phrase of choice for opinion leaders who do not understand the importance of constantly shaping the conditions that surround them.

LOOKING DEEPER is a Field Guide activity designed to draw the reader ever closer to specific examples of the school’s present state of operation. Looking Deeper connects observations to future action. The Looking Deeper template is usually presented in checklist format for use as an observation tool. Looking Deeper gives more specificity to what is happening or what is not happening in the school. Looking Deeper always generates positive energy because it gives people an opportunity to validate existing accomplishments.

TAKING ACTION is a suggested group activity designed to lead faculty members and interested volunteers to their own informed judgments about an appropriate course of action. Each Taking Action activity will involve some form of job-embedded experimentation coupled with a decision-making process. Taking Action makes public our commitment to change the context of the school for the better.

REVISITING WHAT WE STAND FOR
AND QUESTIONING THE FIT BETWEEN
WHAT WE BELIEVE AND WHAT WE
DO IS FUNDAMENTAL TO ANY
IMPROVEMENT PROCESS.