

IN PRAISE OF
American Educators

And How They Can Become Even Better

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Introduction



“Rick, you have lung cancer.” That was the message my doctor presented to my wife, Becky, and me in September 2014. The news flooded us. I wasn’t a candidate for lung cancer. I had never smoked, and there was no history of cancer on either side of my family.

And then the news got worse: The initial diagnosis was that I had stage 2 cancer in one lobe of my right lung. Surgery could remove the lobe and thus free me of the disease. Once the procedure began, however, the surgeon discovered the cancer had spread throughout my right lung. He aborted the surgery, advised us that I had stage 4 cancer (there is no stage 5), and said the goal was no longer seeking a cure but exploring methods to extend my life.

My oncologist was more optimistic. She felt that once I had completed a chemotherapy regimen, I could be a candidate for surgery to remove the entire right lung. This option rested on the hope that the cancer was confined to the single lung. That hope was dashed when we discovered the cancer had spread to my left lung despite the chemotherapy.

Up until this point, my life had been filled with abundant blessings. One of those blessings was that I had spent thirty-four years as a public school educator—as a teacher, principal, and superintendent—a career that I truly loved. I then remained in the profession as an author and consultant. I have written seventeen books and more than one hundred professional articles in an attempt to influence my profession. I have worked with

educators in every state and in countries throughout the world to provide concrete suggestions as to how they could implement the Professional Learning Communities at Work™ (PLC) process in their schools and districts.

But as I assessed my career at this crossroads of my life, I felt more frustration than satisfaction. Throughout history, Americans have criticized their schools—it is more of an American pastime than baseball. I am frustrated, however, that politicians and the media seem to be waging an increasingly aggressive war not just on the public school system but also on the educators within it. Their unfair characterization of teachers and principals as lazy incompetents who are unconcerned about the well-being of their students is nothing like the amazing educators with whom I have worked both directly and indirectly. I am frustrated that members of the profession I love are receiving none of the recognition they deserve for what they are accomplishing in the face of incredibly challenging conditions.

I am also frustrated by what I view as the intransigence of teacher unions at the national, state, and local levels. My grandfather was a union organizer in Chicago, my father was a lifelong union member, and I served for a brief period as the president of my local teacher union. I believe that unions have an important place in a capitalistic society, but I am discouraged when I see unions clinging to outdated positions that make little sense to the public or to their members.

And, while I genuinely admire the members of my profession in many ways, I am frustrated by the fact that educational processes that clearly have a positive impact on student achievement have not yet become the norm in American schools. I recognize that external forces at the state and federal levels have provided teachers and principals with little support for making the necessary changes. I know that the current reform agenda has fostered conditions that actually impede school improvement. But I also must acknowledge that there are powerful processes educators could implement to improve student and adult learning—processes that

lie within their sphere of influence. Too often, these processes are ignored or applied in a halfhearted way that puts a greater emphasis on preserving the traditional culture and structure of schools than on transforming them.

So, in a very real sense, this book arises from frustration. It represents what is likely my final attempt to influence the profession I have been a part of for more than forty-five years. It is a labor of love and a call to arms.

Our profession will not benefit from either unloving critics or uncritical lovers. I intend to be neither. This book is divided into two parts. The first part offers a vigorous defense of American educators and an objective critique of state and national policies that have attempted (and failed) to improve schools through competition, privatization, and increasingly punitive sanctions. The second part challenges educators to accept individual and collective responsibility for taking immediate steps that are proven to improve student and adult learning. I define those steps in very specific terms and stress the goal is not merely to tweak the existing culture and structure of schooling but to transform them.

Changing the traditional culture of public schools that has endured for more than a century is no easy task, but at no point in American history have the stakes for our students been greater. The words of Martin Luther King Jr. (2001) ring true today for our profession:

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. . . . Procrastination is still the thief of time. We must move past indecision to action. . . . Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Or will there be another message—of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history. (p. 162)