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# UNSTOPPABLE FORCES

Change is inexorable. This is not a revelatory idea, but it is essential for district leaders to understand that the change forces at work in our schools, including rapid technology development, require us to adapt our teaching practices to work in concert with these forces instead of acting as a buttress against them. Indeed, district leaders that embrace whole-system change, continually learning and adapting their district's methods to the times, better maintain long-term sustainability and accentuate all the benefits that change can bring.

Whole-system change has three core characteristics: (1) it is about changing *all the schools* in a district, state, or province and not just a few schools; (2) it always zeroes in on *changing pedagogy*—the way students learn; and (3) it always develops and traces *the causal pathways to impact on measurable student learning outcomes*.

In this book, we closely examine certain *unstoppable forces*. But that doesn't mean that such forces automatically do good things; in fact, this book is about how to harness the powerful dynamics present in our culture and convert them into beneficial, deep system changes. There are four themes underway in education that are unstoppable.

1. Traditional schooling is outdated, and students (and we think many teachers) will no longer tolerate the status quo. Boredom and alienation are big push factors.
2. Ubiquitous digital innovation, coupled with social media and other networks, no longer aligns with the hierarchy of existing governance models.
3. New modes of learning—new powerful pedagogies, if you will—are unleashing motivational forces across the spectrum of students. Indeed, we argue that the combination of new pedagogies and digital resources provides opportunities to engage historically disadvantaged students in ways heretofore impossible.
4. New forms of leadership, which we identify in this book, are bringing about positive change. Some of these forces come from the *middle*—the layer between the state or province and the local community. As the middle leverages change, we see new energy bubbling up from the bottom—from students and teachers (Fullan, 2016).

Because these unstoppable forces can create chaos and harm, our book is about how to corral and shape these forces for the common good—to help make unstoppably good things happen. One of us—Michael Fullan—has been focusing on whole-system change since 2003, working with governments and school districts and municipalities in different countries. The other—Mark A. Edwards—led a lowly funded, 50 percent poverty school district (Mooresville Graded School District [MGSD] in North Carolina) to remarkable success during the same period. Indeed, in this book we show how the MGSD has become an inspiration for other districts across the United

States. Moreover, MGSD and others are a part of a global movement toward deep learning (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, in press).

We are *doers*—we go from practice to research. Our commitment to action is our *modus operandi*. We use action as the vehicle for learning what it takes to have an impact. We then write about what we learn and do it better the next time, gaining more insights, writing more, doing more, and so on. We represent a cumulative learning process, and we are proud to share where we are in our doing and thinking in this book.

Chapter 1 raises the red flag of superficial change, or what we might call the *trap of modernity*. Although effective technology use is essential to taking advantage of today's unstoppable forces, if you mistakenly start with technology as your answer, you end up going down the wrong path. Technology is ubiquitous, but it is so easy to surround yourself digitally and not learn anything worthwhile. To dabble is to be worldwide and an inch deep.

In chapters 2–5 we take up the essence of the positive change solution. We examine what deep learning is and what makes it occur. We use our professional capital framework to show that you need all three capitals (social, human, and decisional) working in the service of deep learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). To understand *capital* in this context, think of the worth of individual and group assets and how you must leverage them to achieve broader goals. Capital is powerful when it circulates. When educators learn from each other in purposeful and innovative ways, as they do at MGSD, they are building and using professional capital in ways that improve and sustain the whole system.

Chapters 6 and 7 identify ideas for moving forward. Chapter 6 arrives at key lessons from MGSD for generating unstoppable learning. Chapter 7 goes beyond Mooresville to see how other districts generate unstoppable momentum in learning, including detailed vignettes from district leaders that detail how they reaped the benefits of whole-system change. Although much of what we write about

in this book begins with our experiences at MGSD, there are three encouraging features for wider change we want to highlight.

1. MGSD is a *very* hard case. They don't get much harder, unless you go to the giant urban districts. If they can do it, anyone can do it.
2. MGSD did not carry out its work in isolation. From day one, the district has been a dynamic part of a movement across the United States whereby the district learned from other districts and then helped other districts learn.
3. Other districts did learn from MGSD, and in chapter 7 we look at six other districts that are part of a network of districts going down similar paths.

We should make it crystal clear that this is not a book about technology. The driver is *deep cultural change* in how districts operate—to have measurable impacts on how and what all students learn. Pedagogy and culture are the drivers; technology is the accelerator.

Finally, we can say with confidence that any district can dramatically improve the way that MGSD did. However, a cardinal change lesson from system work is that you can never be successful by trying to replicate or imitate other successes.

We talk in this book about what factors contributed to MGSD's success, but it is not a strict model. You need to learn from other successes and then figure out a unique pathway that fits your own situation and culture. This book provides good ideas and valuable lessons, but more than anything else it is an invitation for you, the reader, to create your own constellation of unstoppable forces to generate deep and lasting change that benefits those you work with and the students and families you work for.