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About the Editors



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Fisher received an International Reading Association Celebrate Literacy Award for his work on literacy leadership. For his work as codirector of the City Heights Professional Development Schools, Fisher received the Christa McAuliffe Award. He was corecipient of the Farmer Award for excellence in writing from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) as well as the 2014 Exemplary Leader for the Conference on English Leadership, also from the NCTE.

Fisher has written numerous articles on reading and literacy, differentiated instruction, and curriculum design. His books include *Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives*, *Checking for Understanding*, *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching*, and *Rigorous Reading*.

He earned a bachelor's degree in communication, a master's degree in public health, an executive master's degree in business, and a doctoral degree in multicultural education. Fisher completed postdoctoral study at the National Association of State Boards of Education focused on standards-based reforms.

Introduction

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.

—Albert Einstein

Stories have undeniable power. Storytelling is deeply embedded in all human cultures and has a profound influence on how we think, how we dream, and how we live our lives through the lens of what we have grown to value most. As teachers, we all have our favorite story to share—a memory, a lesson to learn, a legend. Some story lines have remained true, and others have evolved, or we have embellished them to support new and unique circumstances. Retelling these stories honors the knowledge and experience of those who came before us and helps create a strong, sustainable future.

Think back to your schooling experience. What stories do you remember most? We anticipate that you can quickly recall good times with friends, moments of inspiration and empowerment from your favorite teachers, and points of pride and accomplishment. We also imagine that you—with the same crystal clarity—can recall struggles and complications with friends, times of discouragement with teachers, and moments when you tripped and fell along the way. While our experiences shape the stories that we tell our friends and family, they also shape the manner in which we approach our work. What moments from your educational journey do you aspire to replicate with your students and colleagues? What stories can you recall that define exactly what experiences you do *not* want to create in your classroom?

Now try to remember the stories that your teachers told about *you*. Do you remember the letters of recommendation they wrote for you, highlighting your gifts, talents, and strengths? Do you remember times in which the adults told stories about you and your potential based on both your academic performance and your social interactions? Did familial patterns of behavior that older siblings displayed predetermine your expectations and possibilities? Did the adults tell stories about

you that may or may not have accurately represented who you were not only as a student but also as a *person*?

As we prepare to let our story of Unstoppable Assessment unfold over the next several chapters, we encourage you to reflect on the kind of story that you are creating for, and about, your students. This collaborative team story is the essence of a professional learning community (PLC). Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, and Mike Mattos (2016) state that a PLC is an “ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10). The questions you ask and the subsequent discussions that you hold as you reflect or as you work in teams will often closely align with the four critical questions that drive the work of a PLC (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 36):

1. What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

The team stories we offer throughout this book are real stories based on real teams and educators we know or have worked with. To maintain confidentiality, however, we choose not to identify individual educators’ names or the schools or districts in which they work. Know that the examples we provide come from real practitioners approaching the work of collaborative teams together. To achieve maximum benefit, we highly recommend that as you use this resource and tools it contains, you do so within the context of a PLC or other collaborative team structure.

Educators in the 21st century have the power of the pen more than ever. We can take more responsibility for crafting a script, from beginning to end, that outlines the passion, hope, inspiration, and mobilization of effort we employ to focus on developing each student’s academic readiness and disposition of character. Educators must be key authors in the language they use, the sequence of events they execute, and the climatic moments they aspire to in their critical work for students and for each other. One of the best ways to successfully accomplish this is through systems thinking.

Systems Thinking and Unstoppable Assessment

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2015), authors of *Unstoppable Learning: Seven Essential Elements to Unleash Student Potential*, outline systems thinking as the manner in which we, as teachers, approach the business of student learning. *Systems*

thinking is the process of understanding how systems influence one another within a complete entity or larger system. Fisher and Frey (2015) drive home the importance of planning, launching, consolidating, assessing, adapting, managing, and leading learning in our classrooms in a *systemic* way. The authors assert, “Piecemeal approaches to improving teaching and learning are less than effective and often exhausting” (Fisher & Frey, 2015, p. 1). We’ll take that advice to heart as we examine the assessment element of Unstoppable Learning (which we refer to as *Unstoppable Assessment*) in this book and offer a practical framework to deepen your assessment literacy and fluency.

Educators often find themselves in systems that are not as effective and efficient as they could be—systems that have yet to determine how all elements of the learning organization can work in harmony, systems where teachers and principals independently take care of business as they face situations in which they must ask, “If not me, then who?” We should leave very little about our work to a single individual to address, resolve, or create when such a significant matter—the achievement, growth, and development of our students—is at stake.

All too often, educators have the best-laid plans, and then the students show up! Something goes awry, and all of a sudden, it exposes a vulnerability in the system. It’s often difficult to remedy that vulnerability in the moment. Systems thinking provides an avenue to proactively deal with vulnerability by understanding the interconnectedness among all the factors in the teaching and learning equation. The connections among all the *stuff* teachers need to do in preparation for students become more evident when we consider the patterns of thought and behavior that effective systems thinkers display, and their engagement with the four principles that are the basis for systems thinking.

Four Principles of Systems Thinking

Systems thinking requires educators to consider so much more than the task to complete or the steps in the process. Fisher and Frey (2015) define four harmonious principles for educators to consider as they strengthen learning systems for their students: (1) relationships, (2) communication, (3) responsiveness, and (4) sustainability. We suggest that the component of trust marries all four of these systems design principles together. Each of these principles will be threaded throughout the book’s content and the conversations it elicits. Through our work across the globe, we have found many educators who employ these very principles yet continue to feel stifled and defeated in their efforts to design learning systems that support each student’s growth and development. They feel either isolated as individuals or isolated as a team within their school, in their systems design work.

These educators are forward thinkers in a system that isn't designed to support them. We know that if we want to change our results, we have to change how we operate. For many schools, this means aligning in unity around a single focus of *learning* instead of perpetuating the cycles of organizational chaos that cause forward thinkers to become overwhelmed and debilitated in their work.

We believe the path to achieving this in assessment is by pairing the principles of systems thinking with the four elements of the Unstoppable Assessment framework: (1) seeking, (2) gathering, (3) discussing, and (4) responding to evidence. Table I.1 illustrates the four principles of systems thinking and their connections to our Unstoppable Assessment framework. It should be noted that the systems thinking principles aren't exclusive to individual elements of the Unstoppable Assessment framework. One specific principle does not align to one specific element. Rather, they work hand in hand to support assessment.

Table I.1: Principles of Systems Thinking for Unstoppable Assessment

Relationships	When students have the opportunity to invest in relationships with educators and other students present in their classrooms, they can more readily invest in their learning. Relationships in the classroom are not exclusively between two people, and each relationship can directly or indirectly affect each person in the learning environment.
Communication	The manner in which teachers communicate to, with, and about students, as people and as learners, can enhance—or disrupt—the climate and culture of the classroom community. As teachers discuss students and their learning pathways, teachers do so as though the students are in the room with them. Communication should advance learning and foster a lifelong commitment to doing so.
Responsiveness	Each student needs something unique throughout the learning process. The process must ensure that all learners have access to the necessary academic supports to get them from where they begin to where they need to go in order to perform at the expected level of mastery. Teachers should be responsive to the dynamic changes—both social-emotional and academic—that can occur from moment to moment within the classroom environment.
Sustainability	Differing expectations among teachers will yield differing success levels in learners. Teachers collaboratively work to determine a consistent level of performance—both academic and social—that is expected in all aspects of the learner's experience at school. Misalignment of student expectations will breed complacency and distract from the focus on learning for mastery for each student. Consistency, clarity, and cohesion create sustainable assessment practices and systems that each learner can readily understand.

We have linked the principles of systems thinking with our Unstoppable Assessment work in order to best prepare all educators for the thinking work that is necessary as they seek, gather, discuss, and respond to the student evidence from formative and summative assessments. The chapters in this book are respectively dedicated to each of these elements of the framework, which educators should exercise as they apply systems thinking to their considerations of student evidence and assessment.

About This Book

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the first principle of systems thinking: relationships. We will focus on fostering trust through healthy relationships and honest communication among the adults within the learning organization. Chapters 2–5 guide you through the process of leveraging evidence-based assessment practices to build an aligned system of Unstoppable Assessment: seeking (chapter 2), gathering (chapter 3), discussing (chapter 4), and responding to evidence (chapter 5), respectively. Chapter 6 outlines important evidence-based practices that both teams and leaders can use to advance their work. This chapter focuses on leaders and teams using such practices to ensure sustainability when embedding elements of the systems thinking approach that are required for enacting an assessment plan.

The beginning of each chapter will ask you to consider three different perspectives, with suggested guiding questions around each perspective, that are associated with yielding high levels of student achievement.

1. **Zoom in:** These questions ask you to evaluate your team's current reality and assess what kind of information you need to move forward toward your goals.
2. **Zoom out:** These questions ask you to consider why you need the information presented and how it will advance your work.
3. **Panoramic:** These questions ask you to reflect on how the decisions you make or the conversations you have regarding the content will impact your system and what potential they have to create greater balance and alignment in your building or organization.

You will also encounter these types of questions in the reproducibles we offer throughout this book. These questions are meant to help guide discussion or reflection and, depending on the focus of each specific reproducible, may differ from the questions appearing at the beginning of the chapter. Visit go.hbe.com.au to download the free reproducibles in this book.



We have interspersed what we call *ponder boxes*, indicated with the symbol to the left, throughout the book to encourage readers to think deeply about the content and form their own conclusions and next steps. We encourage you to write notes or sketch drawings of your thoughts and reflections when you encounter these boxes.



Ponder Box

Consider the descriptors for each of the principles listed in table I.1 (page 4). Where are your points of pride? For which of these principles do you have opportunities for improvement? Jot down your initial thoughts in relation to your current practice of these principles of systems thinking.

We recognize that team discussions around each chapter may result in a variety of personal reflections and reactions—affirmations of some practices you and your team have already embedded into your assessment work, aha connections to tweak a practice or two within your system to further enhance what it can do for students, new laundry lists of questions, or an overwhelming sense of confusion on where to go next. No matter where you are on your journey, you are *exactly where you need to be* in order to take that next step forward. We have designed this book for all audiences, regardless of grade level, curricular area, or role in education. At the end of each chapter, we encourage you to complete reflection or planning activities before you and your teammates read the next chapter. These collaborative learning tasks are designed to inspire reflective thinking so you can more readily access each new piece of content while also fostering rich, productive dialogue within your team.

Before beginning chapter 1, take a moment to reflect on the collaborative nature of your learning organization. Check the boxes in the appropriate column in figure I.1 that represent your current approaches to learning.

Tasks I Approach in Isolation	Tasks I Approach Through Collaboration
<input type="checkbox"/> Reviewing standards I teach	<input type="checkbox"/> Reviewing standards I teach
<input type="checkbox"/> Clarifying learning targets	<input type="checkbox"/> Clarifying learning targets
<input type="checkbox"/> Designing scope and sequence or pacing	<input type="checkbox"/> Designing scope and sequence or pacing
<input type="checkbox"/> Developing lessons	<input type="checkbox"/> Developing lessons
<input type="checkbox"/> Writing common assessments	<input type="checkbox"/> Writing common assessments
<input type="checkbox"/> Determining scoring criteria for student mastery	<input type="checkbox"/> Determining scoring criteria for student mastery
<input type="checkbox"/> Reviewing students' work	<input type="checkbox"/> Reviewing students' work
<input type="checkbox"/> Determining next steps in instruction	<input type="checkbox"/> Determining next steps in instruction

Figure I.1: Approaches to learning.

Visit go.hbe.com.au for a free reproducible version of this figure.

**Ponder Box**

Jot down or draw your reflection on your current state of isolated or collaborative learning based on your selections in figure I.1. What is the history behind your current reality? How will an awareness of that history help shape your future approaches to learning?

We know that pieces of the current reality you identified are within your control and other pieces are outside your realm. All these pieces matter, however, as we consider the development of sound assessment practices in our schools.

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