Achieving Equity & Excellence

Immediate Results
From the Lessons
of High-Poverty,
High-Success Schools

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and encouragement for generations of family and friends, and model the admonition of Saint Augustine to preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words; her every act of kindness and generosity is worth a lifetime of sermons.

While I am happy to share credit, I do not share blame for the inevitable errors, omissions, and other failures. The only worse thing than failing to publish is to publish and then be held to public account for these mistakes, a burden I happily accept alone.

—Douglas Reeves, Boston, Massachusetts

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About the Author

Douglas Reeves, PhD, is the author of more than thirty books and many articles about leadership and organizational effectiveness. He was named the Brock International Laureate for his contributions to education and received the Contribution to the Field Award from the National Staff Development Council (now Learning Forward). Dr. Reeves was twice named to the Harvard University Distinguished Authors Series. Dr. Reeves has addressed audiences in all fifty U.S. states and more than thirty countries, sharing his research and supporting effective leadership at the local, state, and national levels. He is founder of Finish the Dissertation, a free and noncommercial service for doctoral students, and the Zambian Leadership and Learning Institute. He is the founding editor and co-publisher of *The SNAFU Review,* a collection of essays, poetry, and art by disabled veterans. Dr. Reeves lives with his family in downtown Boston.

To learn more about the work of Dr. Reeves, visit Creative Leadership Solutions at https://creativeleadership.net, or follow @DouglasReeves on Twitter.

Introduction

Allow me to offer a conjecture about you as the reader of this book. Your interest in student equity and excellence is not passive, as you have a personal and professional interest in seeing more students succeed. You have lost patience with solutions offering long-term results when the students you encounter need results *right now.* You are weary of commercial programs that "worked" with a group of students far, far away, but have been ineffective with your students. And you are impatient with the rhetoric of blame and excuses that serve only to remove the sense of urgency you know is essential to help the students you serve. You may be an educational leader, teacher, parent, or policymaker, but whatever your role, you have a deep sense of responsibility for the children from your own home and those from homes you may never visit but which are, nevertheless, part of the fabric of a society that can be far more just and equitable. If any of these descriptions fit you, please read on.

This book aims to improve the results of all students in your school, no matter their background or socioeconomic status, from the moment you begin applying the principles in the following chapters. This book offers no long-term, five-year plans for success, but rather, examples of how students can make dramatic improvements in achievement, behavior, and attendance in a single semester. You will find a methodology not based on faraway research, but on identifying, documenting, and replicating the results in your school and your community. The local and relevant evidence can be replicated within your budget, your bargaining agreement, and your community's culture. You will find no rhetoric of blame, but rather the promise of hope that tomorrow will be better than today because you already know what to do, right here, right now, without changes in state or local policy. You will find a proven change methodology that does not rely on the traditional and discredited philosophy

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of *persuasion before action.* You will find the fundamental truth that action—not studies, not rhetoric, not leadership charisma, but *action*—is what leads to change that works. That is inside-out change, based on modeling from successful students, teachers, and schools all within your own neighborhood.

The fundamental argument of this book is that equity and excellence must be dual goals for every school, not mutually exclusive goals in which the pursuit of equity is the mirage laid in front of schools serving high populations of students in poverty, and excellence is the exclusive province of schools serving students in wealthy suburbs or elite private schools. As Robert Pondiscio (2019) explains:

> The last several decades of education policy have set equity and excellence at war with each other. If you are wealthy, with the means to pay tuition or move to a community with great schools, you have ready access to excellence. If you are poor, black, or brown, you get equity and an impotent lecture: on fairness, on democracy, or, infuriatingly, on the need for patience and restraint. (p. 322)

Anthony Muhammad and Luis F. Cruz (2019) similarly make the case that the path to change is culture, not rhetorical flourishes or the displacement of rigor with sympathy, that creates an environment of high expectations for every student, providing to the poorest students in urban and rural areas the same climate and culture to which their suburban counterparts are routinely exposed.

Although there are certainly unique elements to every school and every child, that does not justify the inconsistent chaos in leadership, pedagogy, and curriculum that pervades many schools and, in particular, schools serving students from low-income families. The synthesis of the research in these pages is that we can and must simultaneously honor and value the individual chrematistics of each child, while also providing the results that effective culture, expectations, feedback, teaching, and leadership provide. Such dual pursuit of equity and excellence is rarely a required change for wealthy schools. However, it is a clarion call to action in the schools serving the poor, brown, and black children who are the focus of this book.

Introduction to Equity and Excellence Schools

To improve excellence for all while maintaining equity for all, the principles and strategies in this book reflect those practices that high-poverty, high-achieving schools adopt. I refer to these schools as *equity and excellence schools.* The term *equity and excellence schools* is based on systematic observations of schools with the characteristics

in the following list. In my original research (Reeves, 2004) that began in the 1990s, I identified a set of *90/90/90 schools*, or schools in which:

- 90 percent or more of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch

- 90 percent or more of students are members of ethnic or linguistic minority groups

- 90 percent or more of students pass state assessments (as defined by the various jurisdictions of the schools)

Since that original research, I have expanded my inquiry and, as the following pages make clear, benefitted from the research of many other people whose fields of inquiry included successful high-poverty schools. Therefore, for the purposes of this book, I have replaced the term *90/90/90 schools* with *equity and excellence schools* in order to convey more accurately the broad scope of schools that are described in these chapters.

The original equity and excellence studies (Reeves, 2004) focused on 135 schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This research was undertaken by my colleagues and me at the Center for Performance Assessment in the course of our support for a comprehensive accountability system in what was then one of the nation's largest school districts with more than 104,000 students. For most of those 135 schools, there was a clear relationship between higher poverty rates and lower levels of achievement. But there were a few outliers—schools with both high poverty and high achievement. This allowed me to make a careful comparison between the practices of the high-achieving schools and those that were lower achieving. Because all schools in this initial study were in the same district, the variables often associated with student performance—per-pupil funding, teacher assignment policies, and union bargaining agreements—were all the same for both high- and low-performing schools. Therefore, the differences in student performance were not related to these external factors but rather to differences in professional practices by teachers and administrators.

We conducted field interviews and observations with principals and teachers throughout the district in order to better understand the leadership and teaching practices that distinguished the high-performing, high-poverty schools from their lower-performing counterparts. In addition, we collected data from each school not only on state test scores but also on school-based professional practices, such as nonfiction writing, collaborative scoring, and so on. The result is the professional practices I recommend in part II (page 29) of this book. My colleagues and I are confident that these professional practices had made the difference because all the

schools compared, whether high- or low-achieving, had the same per-pupil funding, union agreement, teacher assignment policy, and board policies.

In subsequent years, this small group of outlier schools tripled in size from the original seven schools to more than twenty schools—again without changes in budget, bargaining agreement, teacher assignment policy, or board policies. Then other researchers (Chenoweth, 2009, 2017, 2019; Education Trust, n.d.; Womack, Moore, & Hill-Cunningham, 2018; Zavadsky, 2009) found similar results, identifying similar practices that made critical improvements in student achievement. Other recent research supporting high performance in high-poverty schools includes work by Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas (2011); Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie K. Reinhorn, and Nicole S. Simon (2018); Sarah McKibben (2018); Jim Paterson (2018); Michael J. Petrilli (2019); and Robert Slavin (2019a, 2019b). Although each of these researchers operated independently, all came to the strikingly similar conclusion—success is possible in high-poverty schools, and these successes can be replicated on a large scale. It is important to note none of these studies find a commercial program led to the increase in student achievement; rather, the difference was dependent on the daily decisions of teachers and leaders.

In This Book

This book is divided into four parts. Part I delves into the questions that you, as educators and school leaders, must ask when presented with potential change initiatives for your schools (namely, "Do I trust this research?"). Chapter 1 explains how not all research is equal and describes five different levels of educational research that form the basis of change proposals. Savvy readers must be able to sort the wheat from the chaff when it comes to educational research and select those changes the evidence most supports for implementation in their schools. Once you select a change initiative, chapter 2 deals with the inevitable objections that will arise. This chapter uses the example of equity and excellence schools to demonstrate how leaders may respond to such resistance to change, and explains why you, as readers, can trust the equity and excellence research.

Part II presents the results of the equity and excellence research by devoting one chapter to each of the seven teaching and leadership practices that distinguish equity and excellence schools from similar schools with lower performance. According to the research, equity and excellence schools do the following (Reeves, 2004).

1. Organize their school or district as a professional learning community (PLC)

2. Display a laser-like focus on student achievement

3. Conduct collaborative scoring

4. Emphasize nonfiction writing

5. Utilize frequent formative assessment with multiple opportunities for success

6. Perform constructive data analysis

7. Engage in cross-disciplinary units of instruction

When you establish these practices in your own schools and districts, you are likely to see improved achievement for all students within a single school year.

The challenge of part III is to move from research to practice. In this section, you will consider how to apply the equity and excellence research in any school. This section will discuss the equity and excellence mindset and its differences from prevailing mindset theories, and introduce the key implementation model of *behavior precedes belief* to help teachers and leaders break free of the bonds of traditional change models. Part III also discusses the importance of transforming vision into action through promoting teacher leadership, and how to improve coaching, feedback, and evaluation methods throughout schools and districts.

Part IV returns to the roots of the equity and excellence research by advocating for the development of an accountability system that will help any school system (large or small) identify, document, assess, and replicate successful strategies. It discusses the importance of accountability indicators, from the system level to the school and department levels, as well as the necessity of an accompanying narrative for stakeholders to more fully explain the story behind the numbers.

The book concludes with a clarion call for giant leaps, not baby steps. This is not the time for the meek and tentative.

In the pages that follow, you will find all the tools you need to be bold and to forge ahead with confidence because the students you serve deserve nothing less than your courage, resilience, and perseverance.

A Word About Sources

The extensive reference section acknowledges the work of many scholars in this field, and I hope that I have done them justice. I have found a great deal of commonality among their writings and also a strong sense of consistency with my own research. I have also included observations from the field and, where possible, named the people, schools, and districts involved. In other cases, I have used a synthesis of observations

and my conclusions from my work in fifty states and more than thirty countries. These observations and conclusions represent my best thinking on the matter in late 2019, but I acknowledge that much research remains to be done. Where there is a relevant citation of the work of others, I have included it to the best of my ability. The conclusions without citations represent my observations from extensive research and field study over more than twenty-five years.