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CHAPTER 1

Navigating the Waters of School Change

... all successful schools have followed the same proven formula: higher standards, more accountability, and extra help so children who need it can get it to reach those standards.

—President Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 27, 2000

It still feels like every time you’re walking out on air when you say “We’re not going to do test prep—we’re going to do great teaching.” We’re going to build kids’ confidence in their skills and learning, and that’s going to get them through whatever assessment they face—not just the state test, but an interview, a portfolio, the SAT.

—Liz Ozuna

Cathy O’Connell, Principal of North Reading Middle School in North Reading, Massachusetts, followed what she called a “recipe” when she tried to implement the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework for tiered instruction at her school (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2018). In her mind, test data indicated that a structure such as MTSS was needed, and MTSS aligned closely with new district and state goals. Cathy explained, “We said we were going to implement MTSS, and we paid somebody to come in and explain it and work with faculty, a really nice guy, certainly knew his stuff.” Following her common recipe, Cathy saw a clear need and hired a consultant. Yet, during what seemed to be a routine program implementation, Assistant Principal Michael Maloney candidly admitted, “Teachers didn’t make the connections at all. Really, it was a nightmare.” Cathy added, “They instantly felt like it was a waste of their time.”

Cathy and Michael’s recipe—used widely in our nation’s schools—began a multiyear conversation for our writing team around two essential questions:
• Why does the widely used strategy of identifying problems and finding programs, initiatives, and curricula to address the problem seem to yield such meager results?
• How does deep reform that not only improves schools, but actually reinvents them, happen?

As we began thinking about these questions and this book, we scanned the dense landscape of educational leadership and school change literature. We found many books about school improvement (e.g., Blase, Blase, & Philips, 2010; Kramer & Schuhl, 2017) and many more about school reform (e.g., Elmore, 2004; McDonald, 2014; Tienken & Orlich, 2013). We even found a handful of books about school transformation (e.g., Aguilar, 2013; Benitez, Davidson, & Flaxman, 2009). The research and practice landscape is vast and complicated, full of good ideas and useful advice.

When we delved deeper, other simple but inescapable questions surfaced: “Are school improvement, reform, and transformation the same? Versions of each other? Or even quite different and separate concepts?” As we talked to a diverse group of school leaders, we realized that these leaders often worked simultaneously on issues of improvement, reform, and even school transformation. They also used these terms interchangeably and in a variety of ways. We asked ourselves, “What is our new book really going to be about?”

Very quickly we decided this would not be a book about school improvement or reform. It would definitely not be a book about new and improved programs. This would be a book about, and for, school leaders who take up the challenge of rethinking and reinventing their schools’ most fundamental assumptions and deepest practices. These assumptions might include the very purpose of schools, the nature of equitable educational practice, what it means to be a teacher and a student, or practices such as how students are organized for instruction or how curriculum is developed. This became a book about school reinvention.

The school leaders whose voices inform this book understand that schools certainly need to be improved, reformed, and maybe even transformed. Yet, at a deeper level, they know that schools desperately need to be reinvented. As mentioned in the Preface, this is a book for school leaders who are interested in taking a deep dive into school reinvention—a dive that produces anxiety, challenges everyone to be better, and disturbs closely held cultural assumptions.

THE 21st-CENTURY CONTEXT FOR SCHOOLS

Broadly speaking, at the outset of the 21st century, two profound societal shifts are influencing the work of educators. First, the world has become
a more complicated and interconnected place, and our students need knowledge, skills, and dispositions that previously had rarely been required (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Instead of reporting on what scientists have learned, students are now expected to do the work of scientists; rather than memorizing what historians have discovered, they are now asked to do the work of historians. Students are routinely asked to consider a variety of perspectives on complex issues, craft persuasive arguments, and then design and build models, projects, and simulations to test their hypotheses. In general, the model of content-centered schools no longer serves our children well, especially in an age when content is just something to be downloaded from a cell phone.

Second, students themselves have changed, have become more complicated, and present a range of identities, many of which were not acknowledged a few decades ago. In the 1980s it may have made sense to talk about “homogeneous grouping” and “honors, college prep, and standard” levels of classes. Now, all classes include students with a range of learning strengths and challenges; in some classes there are students who struggle to learn English and students who speak many languages; in other classes are students who are struggling with gender identity. As in the past, classes today include students who are socially adept and students who are socially challenged; gifted readers and students with no interest in reading; students with strong religious convictions and students with none; students who are eager for the school day to begin and students who are eager for it to end; students from the most privileged environments and students who enjoy very little, if any, privilege. In today’s schools, students present a wide range of identities, interests, learning profiles, and life circumstances, and they are asked to perform at increasingly higher levels.

Furthermore, there is a predictive value attached to the identities of many of our students. Often race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, and learning differences have clear correlations with student success and college, career, and life outcomes (Bachman, Staff, O’Malley, & Freedman-Doan, 2013; Farkas, 2017; Kurtz-Costes, Swinton, & Skinner, 2014). The challenge facing educators is daunting. This book is for educators who accept this formidable challenge; who understand and are horrified by the predictive value of such things as race, class, and gender; and who want to develop their capacity and the capacity of their schools to let go of the patterns of the past and allow a new, more equitable future to emerge.

A fear was that we could not change the culture of our school and our small town to expect kids would be successful.
—Liz Ozuna
WHAT IS THE COMMON THEORY FOR IMPROVING SCHOOLS?

In many ways, the theory of action for improving and reforming our nation’s schools is plainly visible and commonly held. It is articulated by policymakers including presidents, shaped by state educational bureaucracies, approved by local school boards, implemented by principals and teachers, and researched and measured by academics, all in the service of students. Presidents Obama, Bush, and Clinton have agreed that what we refer to as the Common Theory of action for improving schools is comprised of large quantities of higher standards, increased accountability, and best practices. This Common Theory normally contains rigor, professional development, data-driven decisionmaking, and high-stakes testing (McDonald, Isacoff, & Karin, 2018). The Common Theory is well known.

At the school level, the Common Theory of school reform looks something like this: First, a need is identified. Often, needs are connected to issues with test scores or other data such as graduation rates or attendance. Second, a strategy to address the need is chosen. Often this strategy takes the form of something new—a new plan, system, or intervention—for example, a new literacy initiative or bullying-prevention plan. Speaking generally, schools and districts tend to buy a program, initiative, or curriculum that addresses the identified need.

In the third step of the Common Theory, the district or school provides, often with the help of an outside consultant, professional development for the educators, who are supposed to implement the program that addresses the identified need. So, for example, when a district decides to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Rose & Meyer, 2006), at least some teachers predictably go to workshops and learn about UDL and how it should look in their classrooms. Districts implementing guided reading programs send teachers to learn about strategies that work, or in other cases bring an expert into the school to coach them about the practice. While most districts claim that professional learning is an important goal, research shows that step 3 of the Common Theory is carried out in a variety of ways and with a range of results (Chung Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; McDonald et al., 2018).

Step 4 of the Common Theory is implementation. Teachers are expected to return
to their classrooms and implement the new practice, curriculum, program, or initiative. The Common Theory typically has very little to say about how this essential step is carried out.

The last two steps of the Common Theory, accountability and measurement, are often conflated. After a need is identified, strategy selected, and professional development provided, then teachers, principals, and schools are held accountable for carrying out the strategy. Fidelity of implementation is important in the Common Theory. Principals, department heads, and other evaluative personnel are asked, for example, to ensure that inquiry-based science instruction is being done correctly. Response to Intervention (RtI) is being implemented with fidelity, or the new schedule is running efficiently. Accountability is a key ingredient of the Common Theory, and consequences (either explicit or implied) are often attached to implementation.

Measurement is also important. After teachers are held accountable, the same principal—although occasionally an outside evaluator—is asked to collect data to determine if the strategy and its implementation did in fact address the identified need. Although measurement is not always carried out effectively (if at all), the Common Theory demands that schools measure their results (McDonald et al., 2018). No district leader would publicly reject the Common Theory and announce that they intend to implement a new initiative, curriculum, program, or structure with no intention of measuring the results. In reality, however, many do just that.

In summary, the Common Theory of school reform widely used by superintendents, principals, school board members, politicians, and even U.S. presidents states that in order to improve, schools need to do the following things:

1. Identify—with the help of data and standards—a need
2. Choose a program, initiative, curriculum, or structure that will address the need
3. Provide some professional learning about the new initiative, program, curriculum, or structure
4. Implement the initiative
5. Hold teachers accountable for faithful implementation
6. Measure the results

The big idea of school accountability . . . was built around three principles: creating rigorous academic standards, measuring student progress against those standards, and attaching some consequence to the results.

—President George W. Bush, Republican Convention Acceptance Speech, September 2, 2004
Figure 1.1. The Common Theory of School Reform

Figure 1.1 summarizes the Common Theory of school reform. The Common Theory is straightforward and enjoys great popularity with politicians, policymakers, and bureaucrats. There is often considerable pressure on educators to embrace it. The Common Theory can produce useful programs and initiatives that do indeed improve certain aspects of schooling. However, the theory may not have much to do with how schools actually work.

The Common Theory in the Real World of Schools

At North Reading Middle School, the MTSS initiative imploded not because the Common Theory was incorrectly applied, but because Cathy and Michael did not consider the invisible forces that are at work in all organizations, and particularly in schools. Cathy further explained:

The teachers had no idea why we were doing this. We didn’t spend the upfront time unpacking the need. We didn’t allow them to discover the need. We didn’t allow them to play with the need. We told them there was a need. They didn’t buy it, and therefore they didn’t buy anything that came after the need.

The Common Theory holds that a need has to be identified, but Cathy and Michael discovered the hard way that the need not only has to be identified, but also unpacked, discovered, played with, and owned by the entire school community. A shared understanding had to be established. Cathy and Michael found that their reform effort was limited
by not-so-visible assumptions, a range of capacities, varied frames of reference, longstanding school traditions, competing expectations, hidden rules, and unspoken norms that exist in every school.

The Common Theory at the Bottom of the Harbor

Much of the thinking, drafting, researching, and debating that informs this book took place in a small office that overlooks the harbor in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Gloucester has been a seaport since 1623, and the harbor is filled with a working fishing fleet and surrounded by a colorful waterfront, a frequent subject for generations of American artists. However, many visitors to Gloucester do not understand that beneath the sleek sailboats and picturesque scenes, there exists a crowded—and not nearly as picturesque—world of powerful currents and tides, submerged remnants of the harbor’s historic piers, abandoned buoys, and sunken vessels.

The harbor has at least three levels. Just below the surface are half-sunken logs and pilings from the harbor’s ancient piers, along with abandoned fishing and mooring lines. Going deeper, there are powerful tidal currents that influence every vessel in the harbor, and half-submerged, abandoned skiffs and small boats that are dangers to navigation. Sitting on the murky bottom are abandoned lobster pots, sunken boats, and even used tires and shopping carts that have been thrown off the docks. Finally, buried deep in the muck of almost 400 years are the remnants of traditional sailing vessels, antique anchors from clipper ships, and large quantities of oil and grease that have been pumped from the bilges of countless fishing boats. As our writing team contemplated Gloucester harbor and thought about the complicated world below the surface, insights and connections emerged.

Insight #1. The first insight was that the enactment of the Common Theory assumes a clear, straightforward journey as educators cross from one side of the harbor to the other. The Common Theory is clear, straightforward, and uncomplicated (hopefully) as it goes from schools as they currently are on one side of the harbor to reformed schools on the other.

Insight #2. The Common Theory of school reform assumes educators have light sailing, fair winds, and a clear direction to improved, reformed schools. However, like Cathy and Michael, most educators find that the journey from schools as they are to improved schools does not happen in a calm harbor, but in the much more unstable, risky, and complicated environment under the surface. Unlike the fair sailing presumed by the Common Theory, the depths of the harbor of school improvement are full of taken-for-granted assumptions, habitual ways of working, and messy, below-the-surface complications that characterize real schools.
This complicated harbor of school improvement is pictured in Figure 1.2. As Cathy and Michael discovered, in real schools the actual path to school improvement requires us to dive into complicated waters filled with hidden rules, competing commitments, and, in many cases, an organizational culture characterized by “conservatism, isolationism, and presentism” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 2505; see also Lortie, 1975).

**Insight #3.** Systemic school reform often seems elusive for the adherents of the Common Theory simply because it takes little account of the unseen forces and obstacles of the “harbor” in which the theory is enacted. It ignores that schools are built upon traditions and deeply held norms. Schools are run by leaders and powered by teachers, all of whom hold a range of different, and even competing, assumptions about teaching and learning, and are at very different stages of their careers. Schools operate in community contexts that are often complicated and contentious. Real change takes place in the deeper, murky waters of the harbor.

**Understanding the Murky Depths**

One useful way to understand the murky depths of the harbor of school improvement is to use the lens of organizational culture. Edgar Schein, a foundational theorist on this topic, suggests that culture can also be charted by depth (Schein, 2016).

Just a few feet below the surface of the water are the “visible artifacts,” the organizational structures and processes that can be seen by any observer (Schein, 2016). Visible artifacts would include the school building itself, trophies and student artwork in the school lobby, teachers, classroom walls, and organizational structures such as the master schedule.

Halfway down into the depths of the harbor are what Schein (2016) calls the “espoused theories.” Espoused theories are what we say we do, but they are not always what we actually enact. Mission and vision statements are espoused theories. Many schools have mission statements describing how all students will learn at high levels. Yet many schools with well-intentioned espoused theories still do not provide each student with a high-quality curriculum or expert instruction. Schools and districts proclaim that they will “identify–select–provide–implement–hold accountable–measure” as they move across the harbor of school improvement, but what really happens in their schools is often quite different.

At the deepest depths of the harbor lie an organization’s “basic underlying assumptions.” These are the unconscious, unexamined, and taken-for-granted values, assumptions, perceptions, and feelings that are the real guides to action in any organization (Schein, 2016). These fundamental assumptions determine how organizations think about power,