

# Preface

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It's not fair!" children often say. We agree. American schools are still not fair. Whether you attend school in the wealthiest suburb or the poorest urban or rural setting, your chances are low of being consistently assigned and able to rely upon a teacher who cares about you, a teacher who knows you individually and knows the course content deeply, a teacher who expects great performance and demands that you rise to meet that challenge. Despite more than 15 years of sustained educational reform, what you get to learn and how you get to learn it in America still depends. . . It depends in large measure on how much mediocrity your school, your school district, and your individual teachers have learned to tolerate and have accidentally or deliberately come to protect.

We wrote volume I of *The Skillful Leader* because we were moved by the plight of children consigned to classrooms where no real learning took place and by the pain of teachers and administrators who knew what was happening and felt powerless to stop it. We believed then, and still do, that one good teacher can make an extraordinary difference in the life of a child. But one good teacher is not enough. For learners to have a fair shot in American schools and classrooms, the quality of their education cannot depend on luck or privilege. It cannot depend on the presence of dedicated individuals who may briefly give children access to a scarce commodity. Schools have to be full of expert practitioners; districts have to be full of schools that demand and produce high-quality learning. Somehow we have to solve what Richard Elmore (2005) calls the problem of scale. We need to influence positively, and permanently, the caliber of every single exchange between those who teach and those who learn. The task is a daunting one.

Since we first reported leaders' dilemmas in 2000, we have watched with great interest as a series of policies, procedures and whole-school initiatives have been aimed at solving the "teacher quality" challenge. The opportunities to confront mediocrity—and the interventions designed to take advantage of those opportunities—seem to fall into four basic categories:

- *Externally imposed mandates, policies, systems, and structures* such as those found in the No Child Left Behind regulations that are designed to raise teacher quality across the board
- *Institutionally controlled systems and procedures*, from curriculum revision to supervision and evaluation, that are intended to influence practice at the local district level
- *School-based practices* designed to build shared conviction, and sometimes competence, in the adults most directly responsible for student learning
- *Supervisory skills, strategies, and structures* meant to address individual cases of mediocre performance

Underlying each of these new efforts to ensure that every child has access to expert instruction are quite different assumptions about what the problem is, who “owns” the problem, and what the solutions might be.

District- and school-based interventions attempt to influence the contexts in which people operate. They share an assumption that some of the blame for mediocre student and adult learning can be placed on local conditions: politics, policies, practices, structures, lack of rigor, and low expectations that block improvement efforts. Much of our new work focuses on what leaders can do to change the district and school contexts that support and sustain mediocrity. Specifically, we see the potential value of mobilizing people into high-performing professional communities capable of bringing about genuine improvement. We also see the current dilemmas of group work gone awry:

- Adults caught in a ferocious whirlwind of activities for activities’ sake
- Exercises in compliance that meet the institution’s need for superficial indicators of progress but produce little or no substantive learning
- Opportunities lost and ideas buried because the toxicity of the exchanges between colleagues or the deadening impact of ineffectual leadership silences individuals who are quietly pursuing excellence

These pages are a compilation of what we have learned by listening and looking, exchanging ideas with colleagues, and analyzing what happens when administrators and teachers try to spread new knowledge and improved instruction from one narrow arena to an entire school. Chapters are organized to consider multiple entry points for confronting the conditions that undermine learning.

Chapter 1, “Conditions Worth Changing,” presents three portraits of instructional improvement that has been encapsulated and blocked from spreading. These cases introduce the potential power of effective professional communities and the ways in which leaders overlook or tolerate “unprofessional” communities, failure to collaborate, and adults who are no longer learning. Chapter 2, “Confronting Blocks to Organizational Learning,” describes the symptoms of five conditions, ranging from Broken

Lens Syndrome and Organizational Attention Deficit Disorder to Feedback Failure, that have a negative affect on a district's ability to spread improvement from one part of the organization to another. It suggests ways that leaders can check for the presence of these conditions and actions they can take to change them.

Chapters 3 through 6 focus on the role of professional communities in bringing about school-wide gains in student learning. To help leaders analyze the behavior of different subgroups within their schools, "Professional Communities and Mediocre Learning" (Chapter 3) describes community function as a continuum that includes five different professional cultures: toxic, laissez-faire, congenial, collaborative, and accountable. This chapter also examines the capacities (Conviction, Competence, and Control) that high-functioning professional groups need to tackle student learning problems effectively. "Community Building 101: Setting the Stage" (Chapter 4) is full of practical strategies for helping groups develop their Conviction, Competence, and Control. Chapter 5 "Challenging and Changing Malfunctioning Groups" focuses on cases of low-functioning schools and groups whose failure to collaborate affects learning opportunities for students. Ineffective and effective strategies for intervening with such groups follow each case. Readers who are dealing with schools characterized by inconsistent adult learning and ineffective teams or departments may want to start with this chapter. Chapter 6 "Moving Communities from Collaborative to Accountable" presents a serial case study of an improving school that is temporarily stuck and trying to move from excellent learning for some to excellent learning for all. Here we examine a number of different potential stretch points superintendents and principals can use, including the development and nurture of teacher leaders.

Chapters 7 through 13 are resource chapters to help readers with practical strategies for ongoing challenges and everyday tasks. "Collecting and Using Data: Vehicles" (Chapter 7) presents many different structures for gathering data in order to use it in learning focused supervision, learning focused evaluation, and collaborative problem solving. In Chapter 8 "Collecting and Using Data: Sources," we explore the same applications, but this time we focus on selecting sources of data for supervision and evaluation and for identifying obstacles to student learning. School leaders need skill in confronting individuals who ruin groups. Chapter 9 "Confronting Individuals Who Undermine Learning" contains eight profiles of typical "underminers" organized in three categories: Teachers Who Actively Undermine Team Functioning, Teachers Who Detract from Group Competence, and Leaders Who Do Not Lead. Each profile is accompanied by an analysis of ineffective versus skillful approaches to intervening with the individual in order to bring about a change in performance. Chapter 10 "Improving Hiring, Induction, and Tenure Decisions" examines the Conviction, Competence, and Controls necessary to staff our schools with high-functioning teachers and collaborators. Chapter 11 "Principal Development and Support" offers practical, field-tested approaches for recruiting and developing high-performing school leaders. No matter what their skills and background, all leaders eventually face the need to respond

to unmet expectations and unprofessional behavior in the workplace. Thus Chapter 12 “Responding to Behaviors That Undermine Learning” offers a range of ways to communicate stop-start messages and models for escalating the response if the first effort is unsuccessful. Chapter 13 “Influencing Contracts and Collective Bargaining” examines the impact of certain legal obligations on a leader’s ability to staff each classroom with the best possible teacher available.

This book, like a baby elephant, had a long gestation. During the 22 or so months it was taking shape, other ideas, advice from wonderful colleagues, and nuggets from reading and research found their way onto a list of things to consider. When it became clear that this was an expanding elephant, we had to begin cutting. Hence the Epilogue in which we offer some of those ideas as hopes to sustain the leaders we admire as they pursue their commitment to confronting mediocrity.