

# Introduction: Reframing the Problem

Our education system was never designed to deliver the kind of results we now need to equip students for today’s world—and tomorrow’s. The system was originally created for a very different world. To respond appropriately, we need to rethink and redesign.

In 1983 a government-appointed, blue-ribbon commission published a report entitled *A Nation at Risk* proclaiming a “crisis” in American public education. It described a “rising tide of mediocrity” in our country’s public schools. It argued that America’s economic security was threatened by a low-skill labor force that was no longer competitive in the global marketplace. The report launched a heated debate, inspiring three national summits on education where many of the nation’s governors and business leaders met to discuss the education crisis. A bipartisan national consensus on the importance of ensuring that all students have access to quality schools and a rigorous academic program began to emerge, as did a host of new initiatives and reforms at the local, state, and national levels. By the early 1990s, “education reform” had become the top priority for state governments. And in 2001, with the passage of No Child Left Behind legislation, the federal government assumed unprecedented authority over our nation’s public schools.

What has been the result of these efforts thus far? Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests suggest some progress in raising students’ math scores at all grade levels in the last dozen years. However, the data on our accomplishments in reading and writing are very sobering. A long-term analysis of the average reading scores of both elementary and secondary

school-age students shows virtually no change since 1980.<sup>1</sup> And although writing scores increased slightly for fourth and eighth graders, the percentage of twelfth graders who scored “below basic” *increased* from 22 to 26 percent!<sup>2</sup> More disturbing still are the data about the percentage of students who graduate from high school, the percentage of those who graduate “college-ready,” and the persistent gaps in achievement among different ethnic groups. According to recent research conducted by Jay Greene and Greg Forster at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, in 2001 only about 70 percent of all high school students who started ninth grade in public schools actually graduated—a figure substantially lower than what has been assumed in the past and well below the graduation rates of half a dozen other industrialized countries. The graduation rate for Asian students was 79 percent; for white students, 72 percent; but barely 50 percent of all black and Latino students left high school with a diploma. Further, those who do finish high school are not necessarily college-ready. Only a little over a third of white and Asian students complete the necessary college preparation classes and possess the literacy skills required for success in college. Only 20 percent of black high school students and 16 percent of Latino students meet these qualifications.<sup>3</sup>

Do you know how the figures for your district stack up in comparison?

We find that many educators do not know the cohort graduation rates for their districts, perhaps for understandable reasons. Nonetheless, we think it is important that you be familiar with these numbers and how they compare with the national figures.

- How many students who begin ninth grade graduate within four years?
- How does your graduation rate for white and Asian students compare with that for black and Latino students?
- Do your graduation requirements match the entrance requirements for college in your state?

What you may well be pondering is this: Why has there been so little progress, despite all the good intentions and hard work of talented people, not to mention significant expenditures of time and money? It is our view that the “failure” of education reform efforts in the past twenty years is primarily the result of a misunderstanding of the true nature of the education “problem” we face. We focus here on the problem because, as Einstein reminds us, “The formulation of the

problem is often more essential than its solution.”<sup>4</sup> As we see it, the problem is less about a “rising tide of mediocrity” than about a tidal wave of profound and rapid economic and social changes, which we believe are not well understood by many educators, parents, and community members.

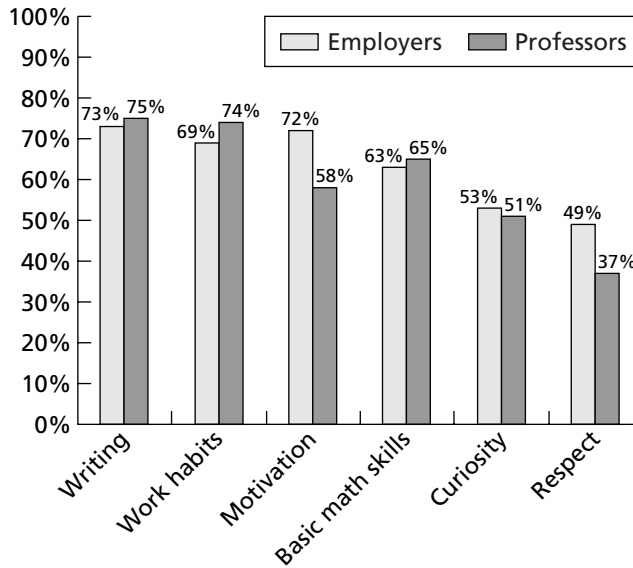
Misunderstanding the problem has, in turn, led to the selection of strategies at the national, state, and local levels that have not met the challenge head-on. To extend the analogy, we have been using gradualist strategies to solve the “slow-moving” problem of a “rising tide” when what is called for is a set of more dramatic and systemic interventions commensurate with the challenge of a tidal wave. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to reframe the education challenge so as to create a different understanding of the nature and range of solutions that are required for real results.<sup>5</sup>

## **A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY REQUIRES NEW SKILLS FOR ALL STUDENTS**

In the 1970s, our graduation and college-readiness rates were even lower than they are today, but this was not considered a “crisis.” It has become a crisis because of the nature of the skills needed in today’s knowledge economy. Our economy has transitioned from one in which most people earned their living with skilled hands to one in which all employees need to be intellectually skilled if they hope to make more than minimum wage. In nearly every industry today, companies are hiring the most highly educated people they can find or afford. For the past decade, CEOs like David Kearns (*Winning the Brain Race*) and academics like Richard Murnane and Frank Levy (*Teaching the New Basic Skills* and *The New Division of Labor*) have described the significant competitive advantages of a highly educated labor force.<sup>6</sup> Employees must know how to solve more complex problems more quickly, and must create new goods and services if they are to add significant value to virtually any business or nonprofit organization, no matter what size. And those who don’t have these skills are not being hired.<sup>7</sup>

Because this change came so quickly, many people are surprised to learn that the skills required in most workplaces today directly correspond to those that are needed for success in college. Although not all young people need to have a college education to get a decent job, employers are increasingly expecting that new employees will have skills comparable to students who do attend college. Figure 1.1, drawn from a 2002 Public Agenda Foundation study, shows the ranking of the skills and habits of mind in which high school graduates are *least* well prepared for

**Figure 1.1**  
**Percentage of Employers and Professors Saying High School Graduates are Unprepared**



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work and college.<sup>8</sup> Notice the agreement on the skills that employers and college professors now demand: writing, work habits, motivation, basic math skills, curiosity, respect. In light of this, the differences seem minor. For example, employers say that their new hires lack adequate skill in writing; college professors find that entering students do not write adequately. The difference is a mere 2 percent; even more striking is how high those percentages are: 73 and 75, respectively.

The competencies that academics and business leaders now demand are not just “the basics—the 3 R’s.” When they talk about good writing skills, for example, both groups are associating effective writing with a person’s ability to reason, analyze, and hypothesize; find, assess, and apply relevant information to the solution of new problems; and, of course, write and speak clearly and concisely. All these, plus the ability to use a range of information and communication technologies,

are the new literacy demands of a knowledge economy that go far beyond basic reading and writing skills. The math skills demanded, similarly, go beyond computation to include a working knowledge of statistics, probability, graphing, and spreadsheets. Finally, the expectation that young adults will come to college or the workplace knowing how to organize and motivate themselves to learn independently, do quality work, and team with others represents a shift toward the increasing importance of what Daniel Goleman calls emotional intelligence.<sup>9</sup>

In a new report written for the Educational Testing Service, Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers summarize the key competencies needed by workers in today's new economy:<sup>10</sup>

- **Basic Skills:** Reading, Writing, and Mathematics
- **Foundation Skills:** Knowing How to Learn
- **Communication Skills:** Listening and Oral Communication
- **Adaptability:** Creative Thinking and Problem Solving
- **Group Effectiveness:** Interpersonal skills, Negotiation, and Teamwork
- **Influence:** Organizational Effectiveness and Leadership
- **Personal Management:** Self-Esteem and Motivation/Goal Setting
- **Attitude:** Positive Cognitive Style
- **Applied Skills:** Occupational and Professional Competencies

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So when studies reveal that the overwhelming majority of today's public high school students leave school "unprepared for college," they also indicate a lack of preparation to access most jobs in our economy and to assume responsible roles as informed citizens in a democracy. An eighteen-year-old who is not college-ready today has effectively been sentenced to a lifetime of marginal employment and second-class citizenship. The realities of today's economy demand not only a new set of skills but also that they be acquired by all students.

Although this information may not be new to you as an education leader, evidence suggests that there is a serious “perception gap” between majorities of high school parents and teachers, on the one hand, and professors and employers on the other. According to a recent Public Agenda Foundation national survey, 67 percent of high school parents and 78 percent of high school teachers believe that public school graduates have “the skills needed to succeed in the work world.” However, only 41 percent of employers in the same survey thought that these graduates had what was needed to do well in the workplace.<sup>11</sup> This finding suggests that the first task in a successful systemic change process is to generate greater understanding and urgency for change (which we discuss in Chapter Eight).

## **GREATER SUPPORTS FOR LEARNING IN A CHANGING SOCIETY**

So we educators have a new challenge, one that could be considered both formidable and unprecedented in any context because we have not had to educate all students to this skill level before. But the problem we face extends even beyond the “all students, new skills” challenge. For when we ask teachers to name the greatest hurdles they face in classrooms, they talk most frequently about students who appear less motivated to learn traditional academic content and lack of family support for learning. More than eight out of ten teachers in a recent study cite as a serious problem “parents who fail to set limits and create structure at home for their kids and who refuse to hold their kids accountable for their behavior or academic performance.”<sup>12</sup>

Strikingly, in this same study, a majority of parents agreed they need to be doing more to ensure that their children do their best in school. Many parents also say that supporting their children’s learning is a significant challenge for which they feel largely unprepared. Despite the fact that more than 75 percent of all parents in one Public Agenda study reported being more involved in their children’s education than were their parents, less than one in four agreed that they “know a lot about how to motivate their own children.”<sup>13</sup> In another recent Public Agenda study, more than 75 percent of the parents surveyed said that raising children is a lot harder today, compared with when they were growing up.<sup>14</sup>

These findings point to profound changes in our society that have significant impact on teaching and learning: today’s young people are growing up with a very different relationship to authority and self-control. First, in an increasingly

consumer-oriented society, a substantial majority of parents agree that children are growing up overindulged and lacking in self-control and self-discipline.<sup>15</sup> Second, young people today show less deference toward authority. More than nine out of ten Americans surveyed agreed that young people's lack of respect for adults is a problem; more than half see it as a significant problem.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, more and more children are growing up “home alone.” With the increasing numbers of mothers who now hold full-time jobs outside the home and the high rates of divorce, the traditional two-parent, single-wage-earner family is fast becoming a relic of the past. In a landmark study of American adolescence, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson found that teenagers spent only about 5 percent of their free time in the company of their parents—and the majority of that time was spent with their mother.<sup>17</sup> Is it any wonder that young people who spend so little time in the company of their parents or other adults do not learn respect for authority? Similarly, how are today's youth supposed to understand the value of self-discipline and self-control without substantial contact with caring adults?

This is not to suggest in any way that today's students and families are at fault. In fact, growing up in an age of instant access to information, many of today's students know much more at an earlier age than their counterparts of a few decades ago, and they are certainly more adept at and motivated to learn new technologies than most adults. When interviewed in focus groups, the majority of high school students acknowledge that they are often bored in class, but they insist that they want to succeed and say they plan to attend college. Most adolescents today also say that in order to be motivated to learn and to do well in school, they need many more opportunities for hands-on learning, as well as closer relationships with their teachers, who can serve as academic coaches and advisors. Similarly, many parents welcome offers of help and advice on how to support their children's learning and attend school or church-sponsored parent support groups, when available.

This question of how to motivate all students to want to learn new skills is rarely raised in the national debate about education reform, even though students are very clear (when asked) about what motivates their learning. Overlooking this critical ingredient—motivation—to reforming education is, we believe, a serious omission. The reality is that students who lack self-control and who have less respect for authority are far more difficult to teach and to motivate by traditional

means. Respect for authority and belief in the value of hard work have been the engines of school success for generations of students—engines that may no longer work in the same ways for many of today’s young people. These are more pieces of the puzzle that must be considered in a full examination of the problem of a “failed” education system. Their omission often leads to finger-pointing and blame.

Indeed, terms like *fault* and *failure* obscure a clear view of the problem and, in fact, are part of the problem. Feeling victimized by the stigma of being part of a profession labeled by many as “failing,” some teachers are quick to blame parents, students, and their colleagues (who must have ill-prepared their students in earlier grades), and the real problem often remains obscured. The important point here is that the economic transformation to a knowledge economy has been accompanied by deep-seated and less visible social changes that are having significant effects on students and families. These changes must be taken into consideration as we try to better understand the education challenge facing us. No one is to blame, and all of us who are concerned with education today need to work together to understand the new challenges for teaching, learning, and parenting in the twenty-first century.

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## **REFORM OR REINVENTION?**

### **TECHNICAL CHALLENGES VERSUS ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES**

Up to this point, we have portrayed a multifaceted problem that contributes to and holds in place an education system that no longer fosters a healthy economy or democracy—or the individuals they are intended to support and represent. The hurdles of teaching *all* students *new* skills in this environment where there are more distractions and fewer supports for traditional classroom-based learning represent an extraordinary set of challenges for educators. Now add to this picture the profound shifts in both student and adult demographics of our public schools—such as the divide between a predominantly white teaching force and an increasingly diverse student body, and the high turnover rate of new teachers, nearly half of whom now leave the profession within the first five years—and one begins to



understand how our education problem is much more one of obsolescence, in need of “reinvention,” rather than failure, in need of mere “reform.”

The almost universally used term “education reform”—besides having a punitive overtone—implies that, at some point in the past, things were okay in schools, and all that is needed to return to this former state is a set of improvements that are relatively minor in nature. Even “school improvement” suggests a need for only modest and incremental change. In reality, aside from the passage of charter school legislation, most of the popular state reform initiatives of the past decade attempt to create more accountability in public education, but they do not directly challenge the basic tenets of what leading, teaching, and learning in schools and districts should look like in the new context of the twenty-first century. The “system,” then, is not being asked to function differently than it has in the past; it is only being asked to do better what it has always professed to do.

The basic assumption embedded in this definition of the challenge of change is that we already know how to teach all students new skills, and so the problem is primarily a technical one of improving the performance of the existing system. It is this assumption—this definition of the problem as being minor and technical in nature, with a solution that would leave the system virtually intact—that we question. America’s system of public education, especially at the secondary level, was deliberately designed to be a sorting machine. The industrial economy of the twentieth century needed only a very small number of college-educated citizens, such as doctors and lawyers. It wasn’t until the 1950s that half of our students received a high school diploma; even through the 1960s, the majority of midlevel managers in businesses did not have college degrees. Throughout the twentieth century, students who dropped out of high school were able to seek and hold good, stable jobs that paid a middle-class wage.

Now, the industrial economy and the kinds of relatively secure, well-paying, blue-collar jobs that it offered in such abundance have all but disappeared. Yet the system that prepares our young people for this very different world remains virtually the same as it was one hundred years ago. In fact, we have never educated all, or even most, students to the standard of “college-ready.” It is not as if educators were doing this in earlier decades and then forgot how. The system has not “failed.” It was designed perfectly to produce the results it needed, and attained. But if the results no longer meet our needs, it follows that the system does not either. Rather, it has become obsolete—much in the way that one-room schoolhouses became

obsolete when we “invented” our current “factory model” schools for a new economic and social era at the turn of the twentieth century.

The problem we face is not just improving the performance of students who are not yet proficient in basic skills. We also do not know how to teach many of the “new skills” outlined by Goleman, Murnane, Carnevale,<sup>18</sup> and others to any of our students—even our “best and brightest.” A new public school curriculum, assessments, and teaching methods for developing emotional intelligence and other such “soft” skills simply do not exist. And although one can find “random acts of excellence” in some classrooms and a few public high schools, successful strategies and systems that ensure all students graduate with the skills needed for work, college, and active citizenship remain to be developed and taken to scale.

What we have then is a new challenge—one for which there exists no adequate knowledge base on which school leaders can draw. Nor will there ever be a “base” that can be applied routinely to all situations. We have what Ron Heifetz calls an adaptive challenge.

In his work on public leadership, Heifetz makes a fundamental distinction between technical versus adaptive challenges.<sup>19</sup> A technical challenge is one for which a solution is already known—the knowledge and capacity exist to solve the problem. Meeting such challenges is not necessarily simple. Nor should the results be presumed to be trivial. Learning to remove a person’s appendix is a remarkable feat. It may be hard to do, but by now an established and proven procedure exists to gradually teach someone how to do it. An “adaptive” challenge, on the other hand, is one for which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem does not yet exist. It requires creating the knowledge and the tools to solve the problem *in the act of working on it*.

Meeting technical challenges often involves changes within an existing paradigm, whereas meeting adaptive challenges involves reconception of the very paradigm in which one is working. IBM’s Selectric typewriter in the 1960s was a dramatic technical improvement over the existing manual keystroke typewriter. But merely improving upon the Selectric typewriter would never have created the IBM personal computer (PC). The PC is much more than a “reformed typewriter.” It is a reinvention of what composing in print is all about.

Breakthroughs require the creation of new technologies, which in turn necessitates the creation of new knowledge, all in response to a new context or societal need. Heifetz maintains that this creation requires organizations to look and act

very differently. He points out that when individuals and organizations meet adaptive challenges they themselves become something different. It is not merely some new skill or capacity that has been “inputted” into the person or organization. The person or organization grows into a different form: it adapts. Transforming organizations to meet adaptive challenges and become knowledge-generating versus merely knowledge-using organizations—what Peter Senge calls learning organizations<sup>20</sup>—requires very different kinds of leaders—ones who recognize that they, as individuals, may have to change in order to lead the necessary organizational changes.

We believe the national education goal of “leaving no child behind” is a vital one for our country, for both economic and moral reasons. We also believe it is an adaptive challenge of great proportions, not yet well understood. Like Heifetz, we believe the adaptive challenge of reinventing American public schools versus merely trying to reform them has profound implications for those who lead them. This challenge requires all adults to develop new skills—beginning with leaders at all levels—and to work in very different ways. And *there is no school for leaders that will teach them exactly how to make their district into one that will leave no child behind*. Unlike a student pilot learning to land in a stiff crosswind, those who want to transform their schools and districts to meet this new aspiration are launched on an adventure with no flight instructor in the right-hand seat.

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As authors, we do not pretend to have all the answers, to be able to counter every crosswind or equipment failure. But through our work in the Change Leadership Group (CLG) with school and district leaders across the United States, we believe we’ve learned enough to be valued copilots in a common adventure. Our purpose in writing this book—in presenting its concepts and, perhaps more important, the tools and exercises that put those concepts to work—is to help those seeking to improve our schools and districts meet the adaptive challenge before us.

This challenge also suggests that we may need to confront some fundamental assumptions and behaviors about the nature of school, the nature of learning, and the nature of leading. In the remainder of this chapter, we highlight briefly a few of these organizational and individual beliefs before turning in successive chapters to explore them in depth.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS**

In our experience, organizations tend to hold a series of beliefs about how to address the need to teach all students new skills. Unfortunately, many of these beliefs can lead to behaviors that actually get in the way of making progress toward that goal. We have selected three such assumptions or beliefs to briefly illustrate this idea; these are covered in more detail in the course of the book.

### **Responsiveness**

Education systems believe they should respond to the ever changing, rapidly multiplying, and broadly diverse needs and demands of many constituent groups. Many of the best in our profession are quick to drop whatever they are doing whenever a student, parent, administrator, school board member, or local business comes with a request, demand, or suggestion. Traditionally, educators have considered this responsiveness a strength: it characterizes an organization that tries to be all things to all people—the historic mission of public education. But this belief in the value of responsiveness, and the accompanying behaviors it generates, has now become a weakness: it diminishes educators’ ability to lead with purpose and focus—an essential requirement for realizing the new mission of all students, new skills.

All too often the work in individual classes, in schools, and in entire districts lacks continuity. Educators often do not have, nor do we push the community to set, real working priorities, to agree on what is most important. Many districts we see have ten (or more) priorities—which means, in fact, they have none. Without determining what is truly important, everything becomes urgent, and, in practice then, nothing is important. Without purpose and focus, how can educators work for the necessary systemic changes in teaching, learning, and leadership? Generate sustained attention on teaching all students new skills? Say “No” to well-meaning distractions that, however urgently advanced, will diminish the ability to deliver on that to which we have said “Yes”?

## Leading and Following

Education organizations value “getting along” in well-defined chains of command and believe leaders should have the answers. We educators are nice people, for the most part, and the majority of us get up in the morning wanting to make a difference in the lives of at least a few children. And, for the most part, we are clear about our roles. Leaders are expected to have answers and to take care of whatever gets in the way of doing what teachers love most—working with kids. Leaders are frequently expected to buffer teachers from any real or perceived meddling from either parents or the community. Teachers want to be asked for input from time to time but often grow weary of long meetings and generally want to focus their attention (and decisions) on what and how to teach. Parents are often a source of complaint and viewed as an excuse for student failure.

Meetings are often perfunctory, with announcements taking up most of the time. Their commitment to getting along means that educators tend to avoid conflict and thus rarely talk about what is required to meet the real challenges of teaching all students new skills. Too rarely do educators identify or solve problems of professional practice together or learn anything new about teaching, learning, and leadership. And too often, what little learning there is comes by listening passively to a one-time presentation on some reform *du jour*. Follow-through is predictably limited.

## Autonomy

Education as a profession has historically promised a relative degree of autonomy, compared with other professions. Indeed, education organizations have been structured to preserve domains of autonomy and individual craft expertise. Many of our best teachers take great pride in the units of study they create and refine by themselves over time—be it a fourth-grade Native American unit, an advanced placement biology class, or an innovative laptop computer program. These successes often become personal—even, perhaps, a source of identity—and it is understandably difficult for educators to open up their practice to scrutiny, share the fruits of their labors with colleagues, or seek constructive criticism from others. For this and other reasons, teachers rarely subscribe to a public, collective knowledge base of professional practice and norms, or engage in collaborative examination of teaching and learning practices.

Leaders, too, can be overly autonomous as each principal tends to his or her own franchise. Those who lead the elementary and middle schools, for example, often overlook what goes on in the high school even when the same students generally matriculate through the whole system. Similarly, high school principals rarely visit their colleagues' buildings. Yet it is often the interchange of these leadership practices that builds the possibility for every student's educational success and graduation.

## **INDIVIDUAL BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS**

We have framed some organizational beliefs and behaviors that are traditional and historic to education: a mission that includes trying to please all constituents, a role-bound responsibility of the leader to identify and fix problems by him- or herself, and the right and nearly ubiquitous practice to teach and hone one's craft expertise in isolation, all within a context that values not rocking the boat. It follows, then, that organizations might tend to reward individual behaviors that are consistent with these organizational values and beliefs and sanction those that run contrary. This practice has been both our experience and our observation.

Some of the most highly effective leaders resist these norms by becoming "creative noncompliers." Deborah Meier is such an example. Despite having received international acclaim, including the MacArthur Foundation "genius prize" for her outstanding work in leading highly successful elementary and secondary schools in Harlem, throughout most of her career in the New York City Public Schools this school leader was treated as a pariah. And in Boston Public Schools, where she was a coprincipal, she was supposed to "ask permission" every time she left her building. (She never did.)<sup>21</sup>

### **External Risks**

The actions taken by education leaders like Meier to achieve success with their schools and districts challenge the status quo of education organizations and risk disturbing the very beliefs on which they were founded and which shape day-to-day behaviors. Their actions first, however, often represent changes in their own beliefs and illustrate the significant transformation required for most leaders and, ultimately, for everyone in the system.

Moving a school or district away from being highly reactive—trying to be all things for all people—and toward greater purpose, focus, and more systemic work to improve teaching and learning requires that a leader take calculated political risks—in effect betting that a certain theory of change and set of aligned strategies will improve student achievement. Leaders who publicly commit their school or district to a course of action with equally public expectations for improvement may provoke disappointment and disapproval of those constituent groups whose interests are no longer front and center. What if the improvements don’t come or take longer than expected? Leaders will be held far more accountable than if they’d gone the traditionally safer route, responding to diverse constituents’ requests and without short-term accountability measures. Leaders who act publicly and with purpose challenge individual behaviors and beliefs associated with a “responsive” system that continues to remain unfocused and largely unaccountable.

### **Internal Risks**

Weaning a school or district from collective habits of compliantly “getting along” and moving toward more active engagement in learning and problem solving also requires leaders to give up their role as “experts” who have all the answers. To fashion an organization that can generate the knowledge to teach all students new skills, leaders must confront and support individuals from all levels of the system in ways that enable deep understanding of the reasons for this challenge. Leaders must then find ways for these individuals to coconstruct solutions to their problems of practice.

Unaccustomed to these new roles and expectations, teachers and community members often express a mixture of suspicion and frustration with this new leadership style. Michael Ward, recently retired superintendent of the West Clermont Public School District in Ohio, describes how he began his work by stating at every teacher, parent, and community meeting that being an “average” district was no longer good enough. Over and over, he emphasized that he did not have the answers for the district—they were going to create them together. Finally, a teacher confronted him at a meeting: “Come on, Dr. Ward. We know you have a plan. Just tell us what you want us to do.” He did not. Ward was breaking the mold of expected superintendent behaviors by steadfastly insisting that the organization had to meet this new challenge through a more collaborative process of dialogue and inquiry.

## **ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE AND THE RISKS: MOVING TOWARD COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE VIA COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

As difficult as it is for positional leaders to sufficiently put aside their expertise and become collaborative public learners, we find that the greatest challenge for leaders of schools and districts may be to move their systems away from the highly autonomous work habits that can result only in “random acts of excellence” and toward accountable “communities of practice.” Organizations that engage in ongoing dialogue around goals, priorities, and professional standards for individual and group performance intentionally foster the skills and norms that require everyone in the system to work more collaboratively and to be more accountable to one another. Everyone’s work becomes more visible—beginning with the leader’s. The leader models learning, teamwork, and openness to others’ feedback—behaviors very different from those that are traditionally associated with school or district leadership.

When Kennewick, Washington, Superintendent Paul Rosier wanted the district to focus more on continuous improvement of teaching, he committed to spending the equivalent of one day a week in classrooms and actively participated in all teacher and administrator professional development programs. He made it clear that he, too, needed to learn what good instruction looks like and, more important, what the central office had to do to support teachers and principals in this work.

Superintendent Dale Kinsley’s leadership of Bellingham, Washington, provides another illuminating example of how leaders can model collaborative learning. When Kinsley set out to create a system where coaching for improvement was the norm at every level, he began by working publicly with coaches himself. These coaches also conducted focus groups with teachers to better understand how he, personally, and the other district leadership could better meet their needs, improve communication, and build trust. Kinsley then met with the faculty at each school to discuss what he’d heard from the focus groups and what he would change. Throughout this process, he talked frankly about what he had learned through his mistakes and publicly acknowledged the value of the coaching he was receiving. Kinsley’s behavior publicly challenged the belief that, as a leader, he had all the answers and did not need to improve his own practice. He also set a new communication pattern for the district, breaking as well the perception of an aloof superintendent who rarely interacts with teachers.



The leaders we've mentioned, and others whose stories we tell in the coming pages, are succeeding at improving student achievement in their classrooms, schools, and districts in part because of a personal commitment to become models of the kinds of change they seek for others. Working to change their own individual beliefs and behaviors and modeling these behaviors with their staff, these leaders have taken the first steps toward creating organizational cultures with a laserlike focus on the new challenge of success for all students. These are cultures rooted in new organizational beliefs and behaviors that support and adapt an organization to learn continuously. They are cultures that generate the new knowledge to systematically improve teaching and learning. They are cultures that sanction and support a different way of being to achieve a different end.

But what enabled these leaders to take their first courageous steps? Ward did not simply wake up one morning and decide to dramatically redefine the degree of control he needed to lead an improvement process. He did not just read an inspiring book with suggestions and examples of a new way to operate. Several years into our work together, Ward told us: "We set out to work on our schools and discovered that, in order to really succeed at it, we had to work on ourselves as well."

Ward began by acknowledging that he, as one individual, didn't have all the answers about how to improve learning in every classroom. He realized that if the district was going to meet this new challenge, he would need everyone's best thinking. And so he worked, first, to transform his administration from a group of individuals who were specialists and who rarely collaborated into a problem-solving leadership team. Over time, this group evolved into what we call a leadership practice community—leaders committed to helping one another solve problems of practice related to the district's teaching and learning challenges together.

Soon the leadership team realized the need to transform the ways in which principals worked together as well. First, the meetings with elementary principals, then all the principals, changed from a time for announcements to opportunities to learn together and to create new knowledge about how to improve teaching and instructional leadership. And in time, principals similarly transformed their meetings with teachers, as these new ways of working collaboratively cascaded through the organization. (This transformation progressed through three distinct phases, which we describe in Chapter Eight.) Theirs is a story of both individual and organizational

change on behalf of improving all students' learning. You'll hear more of their and others' stories throughout *Change Leadership*, reinforcing the idea that adaptive change—reinvention—requires leaders who look both inward and outward and work on two very different kinds of transformation—their own and their school's or district's. The framework and the tools provided in the following pages will provide you with supports to help you on these two parallel journeys.

In this chapter, we explored some of the broader economic and social changes of the past quarter century and how these help us better understand—and reframe—the nature of the educational challenges we face. We argued that the challenges of transforming American public education are less about failure and reform than about obsolescence and reinvention. We reminded you that America's public schools were never designed to teach all students the new skills required for work, learning, and active citizenship in the new knowledge economy, and we proposed the need to invent a system that can educate all students for success in the twenty-first century. This is an adaptive problem, one in which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem must be created in the act of working on it.

So now it's your turn to focus on your own classroom, school, or district setting. We suggest that you not go on to Chapter Two until you have actively contemplated the questions posed in Exercise 1.1. If you are part of a study group—or a nascent leadership practice community among change leaders coming together to discuss this book—you will want to use the group version of this exercise, found in Appendix A, before reading further in *Change Leadership*.



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## Exercise 1.1: Identifying the Problem

### Step One

Reflect individually on the following questions:

1. From your vantage point in the classroom, school, or district office, what do you see as the greatest challenge you and your colleagues face related to improving your “system” in response to the new challenges we face in education? What is the number one problem you are trying to solve?
2. What are some of the organizational changes required to solve this problem? What practices, structures, or policies may need to change in classrooms, schools, and districts in order to solve this problem?

3. Are there organizational and individual beliefs and behaviors associated with this problem that may need to change, beginning with your own? From what to what?
4. Finally, what might be some of the implications for leadership at your particular level to solve this problem? What might you, as a leader or group of leaders, have to do differently?

## Step Two

Take the time to write down your responses to these questions and to list any additional questions that come to mind. Then put this sheet in a safe place; we will ask you to refer to it later.

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## Endnotes

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10. Anthony P. Carnevale and Donna M. Desrochers, *Standards for What? The Economic Roots of K-16 Reform* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 2003), 40.
11. Jean Johnson and Ann Duffett with Jackie Vine and Leslie Moye, *Where We Are Now: 12 Things You Need to Know About Public Opinion and Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 2003).
12. Johnson and others, *Where We Are Now*, 16.
13. Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, and Ann Duffett with Claire Aulicino and Joanna McHugh, *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk About Parental Involvement in Schools* (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 1999), 28.
14. Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, and Ann Duffett with Leslie Wilson and Jackie Vine, *A Lot Easier Said Than Done* (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 2002).
15. Although 83 percent of all parents state that it is essential their children learn self-control and self-discipline, only a third say they have succeeded in instilling these values, and half of higher-income parents surveyed agreed that giving their children too much was a problem in their family (Farkas and others, *A Lot Easier*, 2002).
16. Johnson and others, *Where We Are Now*.
17. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson, *Being Adolescent* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
18. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*; Carnevale and Desrochers, *Standards for What?*; Murnane and Levy, *Teaching the New Basic Skills* and *New Division of Labor*.
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20. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994).
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