Chapter ONE

From Vision to Action: An Overview of the School Change Process

A CHEATING STORY

Megan was a high-performing student at an academically challenging parochial school—and she was frustrated. Everywhere she looked it seemed like her classmates were cheating. They copied each other's papers, wrote answers on their shoes, and forged notes to get extra time on tests; one student even created a custom water bottle label with test material embedded in it. Megan had never cheated. She wanted to do the right thing, but it felt like she was getting the short end of the stick. Why should everyone else get ahead by cheating, but not her? She couldn't help but think she was in a situation where you had to "cheat or be cheated." She considered approaching her faculty advisor about what she was observing, but that was complicated. She didn't want to get her friends in trouble, and besides, it seemed like some of the teachers knew what was going on and just looked the other way. So she decided not to do anything, and her frustration continued to build.

Megan wasn't the only one who noticed the cheating problem. A local newspaper ran a story on extensive cheating at her school when some high-profile incidents were leaked to the press. To their credit, the school leaders acknowledged that the school had a problem, and they came to Challenge Success for help. They formed a team of

administrators, parents, teachers, and students that began to gather data to learn more about why students were cheating. By interviewing and surveying students and faculty, they learned that kids cheated for a number of reasons, such as having too much work to complete in the time available, feeling pressured to take too many high-level courses or to make a certain grade in a course, perceiving that the teachers didn't care about breaking the rules, and sometimes because they felt the whole system was unfair so cheating didn't really matter. The team collected and reported information on 38 incidents of general cheating, along with 50 incidences of plagiarism during the course of one school year, out of a total student body of approximately 1,600 students.

With data in hand, the team began a school-wide discussion on the importance of integrity. A panel of students spoke candidly to the faculty, sharing what was happening on campus and how concerned they were about the culture emerging at their school. As a result of these conversations, students and teachers together created an honor code to be used with every paper, quiz, test, project, and assessment. They also engaged in a massive educational effort to make sure that all parties—students, parents, faculty, and administrators—understood what this new honor code meant. All stakeholders signed the agreement, showing a commitment to solving the integrity problem together. The school made it clear that the honor code was in place to help students and faculty take responsibility for poor choices, not just to punish cheaters. The academic integrity task force clearly defined cheating practices and created a transparent process for reviewing infractions, including a student-run judicial board. The administration educated teachers on how and when to report violations, and because there was a consistent policy in place, the faculty felt supported in their efforts. In professional development sessions, teachers also learned to develop more "plagiarism-proof" assignments and alternative forms of assessment and to rotate exam materials to reduce the chances of cheating.

Integrity became as important as every other part of the curriculum, and teachers integrated the study of integrity into their subject areas when possible. For example, students were regularly asked to write journal entries on current events reflecting integrity or cheating behavior, and the principal wrote about positive integrity practices each month in her community newsletter. The faculty understood that adolescents make mistakes and that valuable lessons could be learned from a poor choice in order to prevent it from happening again. In parent education sessions, administrators addressed parents' fears of a blemish on their children's permanent record, and parents were coached on a case-by-case basis on how to respond appropriately at home when a student received a judicial infraction.

As a result of a community effort to fairly, transparently, and meaningfully address cheating, the school saw general infractions drop from 38 to 7, and plagiarism incidences drop from 50 to 11 during the next school year. Students and faculty reported feeling proud of their collective efforts to change the culture to one of community trust and integrity (Challenge Success, 2012b). As a result of their work with Challenge Success, the students on the team developed a catchphrase, "Find it, own it, live it." As one student explained, "Finding what integrity means to you and really owning that definition and living it out in academics, sports, extracurriculars, and even outside of school. This is something that you could apply to any aspect of your life."

This is just one example of how Challenge Success works with schools to make positive changes. Throughout this book, we will look at a number of examples of different kinds of changes in policy and practice that we think are relevant to schools nationwide. By sharing success stories and lessons learned, we hope to help educators consider the challenges their own schools are facing and how best to address the problems by creating an action plan for change. The next section describes the typical stages of this change process.

HOW DOES THIS WORK? PRINCIPLES FOR CHANGE

Our concept is straightforward: we believe that effective school change happens when all stakeholders—administrators, faculty, parents, counselors, and students—come together to identify problems and work on solutions. This is not a revolutionary concept, but how often have we seen reform efforts superimposed on schools with little student or teacher voice or input, and how often have we watched them fail? School reform experts agree: When schools work with a team of stakeholders in a focused way, they can make real progress toward improving policies and practice (Barth, 1991; for review, see Desimone, 2002).

At Challenge Success, we partner with suburban and urban public, charter, parochial, and independent schools. Schools involved in our program send full teams to attend an intensive conference in the fall, where they identify problems to be addressed at their school sites. In some cases, teams have a pretty good sense of what needs to be worked on when they arrive; in others, predetermined ideas are turned on their heads based on discussions and workshops at the conference. Our process allows schools to take the time to determine the root causes of student stress and disengagement at their particular site, and then we help the school design an individualized school plan for changes during the year to increase student engagement and well-being. We provide each school

with a coach, who guides the team through this process every step of the way. This team-based, site-specific approach is key, and the coach helps to make sure schools stay on track and don't lose focus throughout the year. The coach serves as a primary facilitator and liaison who shares research-based approaches and best practices and helps schools to select and implement these at their sites. Finally, teams reconvene each spring to problem-solve challenges with other schools and to celebrate success stories. Many schools admit that without the helpful prodding from an experienced coach and without the built-in accountability that comes with attending the spring conference, they might not have made as much progress throughout the year.
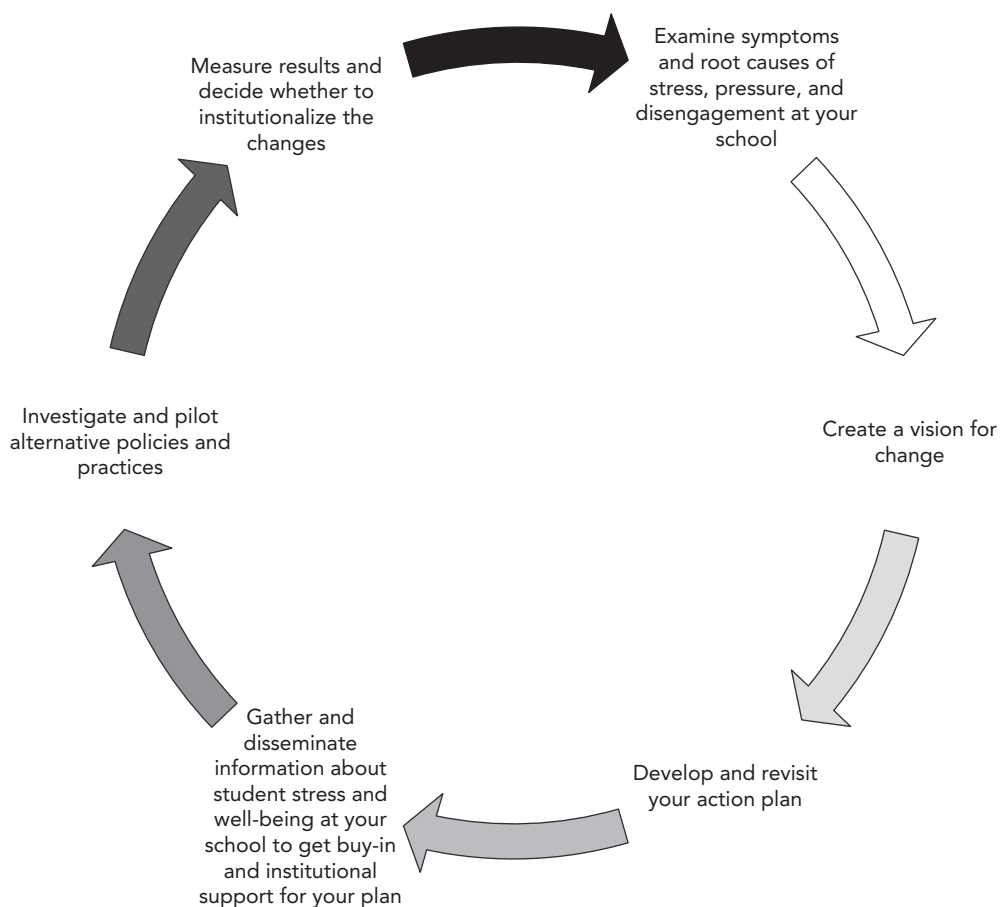
We don't want "flash in the pan" results at Challenge Success schools; we want changes to stick. Too often schools enact the newest policies or practices du jour without thinking through how these changes fit with long-term goals and other initiatives going on at the school or district level. We know that in order to effect lasting change, several things need to happen: Everyone on the team needs to feel like he or she is a part of the process, and all voices need to be heard. You'd be surprised by how wise a sixth grader can be if you give her a chance to speak her mind. Our successful teams have a common vision for the long term, and they work with us to develop a roadmap to get to where they want to go. Team leaders take what they learn at our conferences back to their broader community to educate more students, teachers, and parents in order to earn their buy-in. When all of this work has been done thoughtfully, we see a culture of collaboration and trust form alongside a willingness to change that frequently doesn't develop with a top-down approach.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE CHALLENGE SUCCESS TEAMS

Since the inception of our project in 2004, we have learned a lot about what makes an effective school team and the general progression that teams go through as they create changes to reduce student stress and increase health and engagement at their school sites. Figure 1.1 presents a visual depiction of typical stages in the process. While the change process varies from school to school based on the unique circumstances and needs of each, we have found some common characteristics of effective teams and the stages most teams go through as they create change.

An effective Challenge Success team has a clear leader or champion and a stable core team that may include the principal or other administrator, one or more teachers, one or more parents, two or more students, and one counselor or psychologist.

Figure 1.1 Typical Stages in the Challenge Success Change Process

Measure results and decide whether to institutionalize the changes

Examine symptoms and root causes of stress, pressure, and disengagement at your school

Create a vision for change

Investigate and pilot alternative policies and practices

Develop and revisit your action plan

Gather and disseminate information about student stress and well-being at your school to get buy-in and institutional support for your plan

This team:

- Attends the Challenge Success fall conference and spring follow-up conference, and meets multiple times with the Challenge Success team coach at the school site.

- Regularly gathers and disseminates information to the school community about student health, engagement, and integrity, and encourages cross-stakeholder dialogue about this information.

- Has an action plan that reflects a vision for change and contains a clear but flexible schedule for moving forward.

- Holds meetings at least quarterly to review and push forward the action plan.
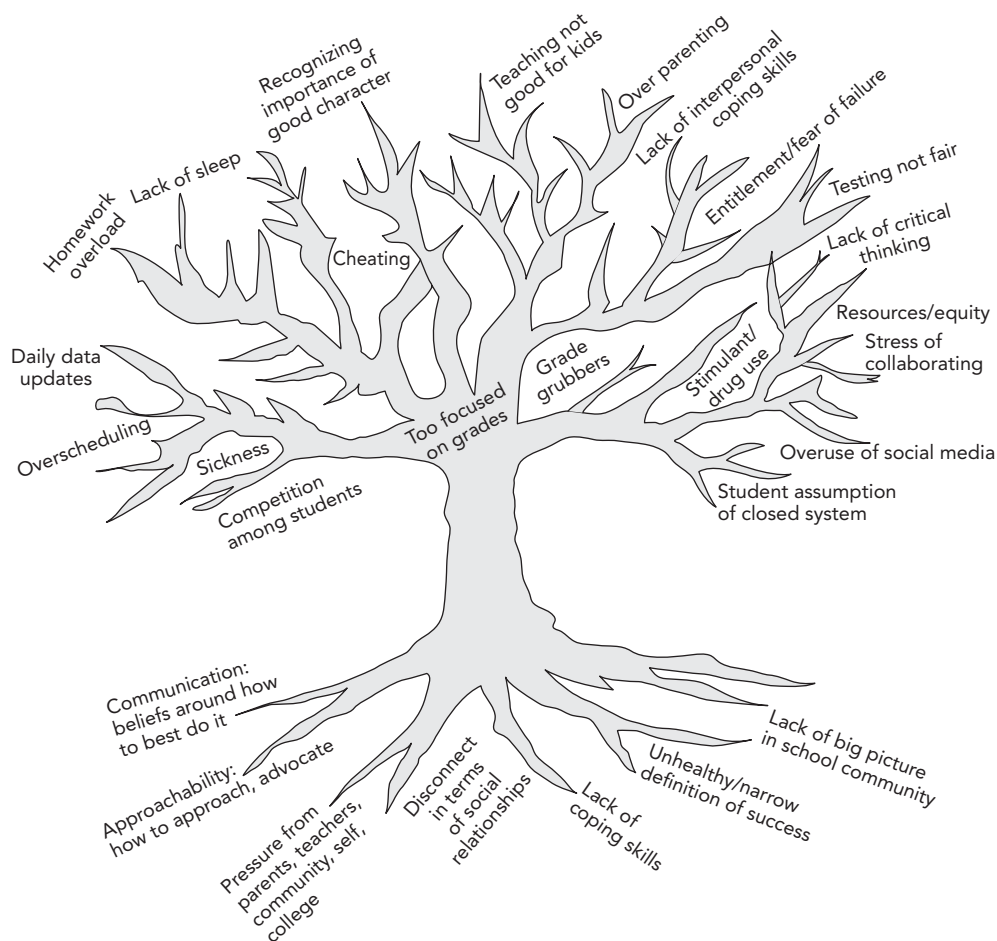
- Involves all stakeholders at each stage of the change process.

- Pilots discreet, incremental changes rather than trying to do too much all at once. Changes are based on the school community's needs and are known from research to improve engagement with learning and student well-being.

- Evaluates results of incremental changes before deciding to institutionalize reforms.

- Attends fall and spring Challenge Success conferences in future years as needed.

Identifying the Problem: Causes of Unhealthy Stress, Pressure, and Disengagement

Frequently school teams confuse symptoms of stress and/or student disinterest in learning with the root causes and sources of pressure at their school. For example, in the case study mentioned earlier, the school reported a widespread cheating problem among students. In theory, there could be several causes for the cheating: the student body could hypothetically be morally bankrupt; the pressure to get a higher score could outweigh the risk of getting caught cheating; students could be so bored that they lack interest in completing assignments on their own; and so on. You can imagine that solutions to curbing the cheating issue would vary significantly depending upon which of these root causes seemed most pervasive. One of the first things we do with our schools is walk them through an exercise that focuses on identifying what kinds of negative behaviors are happening on their campuses. Team members call out symptoms and identify the root causes as well as all of the stakeholder groups affected by these causes. In the cheating case, students were responding to certain cues at the school to act the way they did. The school discovered that students felt they had too much homework, unrealistic expectations from parents and teachers, and an overall sense that the climate at the school was based on a "survival of the fittest" mentality instead of a cohesive and supportive community. The teachers were also clearly affected and upset by the climate. Given the symptoms and causes the Challenge Success team identified, it seemed that the faculty would benefit from professional development on how to teach in a more engaging way, and that administrators needed help to implement policy changes to address cheating and provide more support to teachers. Parents also needed more education on why kids were cheating and what their role in the change process might look like. Since everyone seemed to be a part of the cheating problem at the school, everyone needed to be a part of the solution as well.

Figure 1.2 presents a sample of one school's "stress tree" exercise identifying symptoms and root causes. Note that we ask schools to consider symptoms and causes of

Figure 1.2 A Sample "Stress Tree"

Recognizing importance of good character

Teaching not good for kids

Over parenting

Lack of interpersonal coping skills

Entitlement/fear of failure

Testing not fair

Lack of critical thinking

Homework overload

Lack of sleep

Cheating

Resources/equity

Stress of collaborating

Daily data updates

Grade grubbers

Too focused on grades

Stimulant/ drug use

Overscheduling

Sickness

Overuse of social media

Competition among students

Student assumption of closed system

Communication: beliefs around how to best do it

Approachability: how to approach, advocate

Pressure from parents, teachers, community, self, college

Disconnect in terms of social relationships

Lack of coping skills

Unhealthy/narrow definition of success

Lack of big picture in school community

"unhealthy" stress when they create this tree. We know that some forms of stress (called "eustress") can be healthy and positive; for instance, when you are about to give a speech and you feel some butterflies in your stomach, this kind of short-term stress might provide energy and motivation to do well on the speech. When we refer to stress throughout this book, we are talking about an unhealthy, chronic form of stress, also known as "distress," that is associated with feelings of concern and anxiety and may lead to physical and mental health issues and poor performance on tasks. Different tasks or experiences can lead to distress for different students, especially if the students feel that they do not have the resources or ability to cope with the stressors.

Typically, we also recommend a school-wide survey or data gathering process to confirm the symptoms and root causes that surface in this tree exercise. Approximately 75 percent of all the schools we work with each year opt to take our Challenge Success survey as a way to gather preliminary data. Once the team identifies causes of stress and other negative behaviors at the school, and the team understands the impact on all stakeholders, we are ready to start creating a vision for change.

Moving (Slowly) Toward Change

In some ways identifying what is going on at schools is the easy part—students are not shy about telling the adults in the room what is really happening. Kids, after all, are living this day in and day out, and they have a lot to say about how things could be improved at their school. Students frequently lead the discussion on which problems are most important and help to guide teams as they agree on a vision for change at their school. Creating a vision statement seems straightforward, but many schools aren't used to thinking in these terms. They often struggle as we ask them to limit themselves to one or two root causes to address. Some team leaders want to take on multiple initiatives all at the same time. In our experience, schools are more likely to fail when they take on too much at one time. We make sure schools create a focused and feasible vision statement. The vision should address one or two root causes and should be something the school can actually accomplish. For example, the vision probably won't include changing college admission policies or abolishing the Common Core State Standards. We bring discipline to this part of the process and insist that schools start off slowly and with realistic goals. When schools are new and are starting from scratch—or when they want to start a new division or school-within-a-school where they overhaul many aspects of the original mission, curriculum, structure, and philosophy—we work with them for two to three years to carefully plan all the changes and hire faculty and staff who align with the new vision. For lasting change to occur at established schools, however, we recommend that they "turn their ship slowly" and stay aligned with a few root causes to address in a systematic way.

Of course, not all of our schools are working to solve the same problems. Our case study school, for instance, had a vision to foster a culture of integrity at its school. Other schools at our conference are working with different visions for change—perhaps a vision to increase critical thinking and creative problem solving for their students, or a vision to reduce workload without sacrificing rigor. Part of what we've learned over

the past decade is that, although it would be terrific to have a one-size-fits-all approach to create change in schools (and in families for that matter), real change doesn't work that way. Though there are certainly common problems we see across schools—and some common practices to address these problems—schools need to examine their own issues and take their own paths toward implementing solutions. In other words, when you mandate a common approach, it tends not to work. Each school is unique, and understanding the nuanced culture and values at each site is critical to allow schools to design their own vision statements and action plans.

From Ideas to Action

Having a general idea and vision for change is one thing, but getting something done in a school environment is another. And, when you work with schools ranging from small private schools to large public systems, the expected rate of change differs from school to school. Some schools take much more time to analyze the problem and agree on a vision. But eventually they all get to the next stage in the process: making a plan for change.

Schools start by brainstorming potential strategies, and nothing is off the table, no matter how seemingly radical, bizarre, or impractical. Then they narrow their ideas down into specific actions that will support their vision. Back to our cheating example: The school wanted to instill a culture of integrity. Their action plan included the following:

> We will ask all faculty and staff to have students reflect on the culture of integrity. Students will keep journal entries on times when they see conflicts of integrity in school and out.
>
> Our theme for parent education this year will be integrity and the parents' role in helping to foster this.
>
> We will ask all stakeholders to join in a process of creating and implementing an honor code and student-run judicial review process.
>
> We will offer professional development sessions for faculty on creating more plagiarism-proof assignments.

We then ask schools to be clear on how these planned actions may lead to increased engagement and/or student well-being. For instance, our case study school wrote:

A new honor code will help to engage students with learning as opposed to just "getting the grades."

This, combined with the journal reflections, faculty professional development, and parent and student sessions on increasing integrity, should allow for a better school environment, which will promote student engagement and, ultimately, greater well-being.

Next, we ask schools to think about what resources may be needed to achieve their vision. For example, knowing that your school superintendent is on board may mean that he or she will fund needed professional development and parent education. We also ask schools to anticipate obstacles to realizing their vision and to devise strategies to overcome those obstacles. If the school suspects that parents and students will resist change (and they typically do resist change, as do the faculty), the school might schedule specific parent education sessions and faculty development workshops, and create a student task force to hear from a broader group of kids to achieve greater buy-in for the action plan.
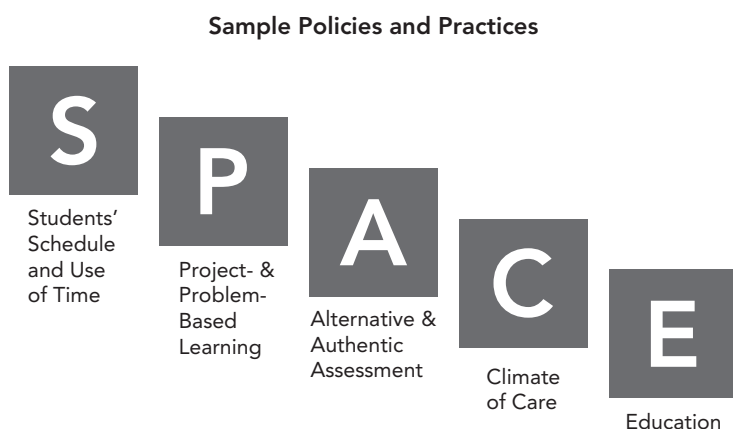
We encourage our schools to be proactive when it comes to building institutional support; without the cooperation of all the various stakeholders, plans are not likely to move forward. Perhaps most important, we hold schools accountable for what they agree to do, and we benchmark their progress. We work with them to stay on schedule and to follow their action plans, and then help them to determine the effectiveness of the changes in policy or practice by implementing further surveys or research to see if the changes actually made a difference in alleviating the original problems.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS BOOK

At Challenge Success we have organized our schools' best practices into a framework we call SPACE, as shown in Figure 1.3.

We based this framework on vision statements and action plans from Challenge Success schools in our early years of work, as well as on the research on best practices for

Figure 1.3   SPACE Framework

Sample Policies and Practices

S	Students' Schedule and Use of Time
P	Project- & Problem-Based Learning
A	Alternative & Authentic Assessment
C	Climate of Care
E	Education

effective schools (for examples, see Darling-Hammond, 2001; the Whole Child Initiative; and the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research).

The remainder of the book is organized to cover each of these components, which we have identified as the main categories of change that we recommend to schools:

- Students' schedule and use of time
- Project- and problem-based learning
- Alternative and authentic assessment
- Climate of care
- Education for parents, students, and faculty

Additional chapters focus on homework and Advanced Placement courses, since these topics often impact several of the other components and tend to be particularly challenging for schools. We'll discuss how students spend time during the day and how that might be improved to allow more time for transitions, reflection, and deeper learning. We'll show how real, interdisciplinary, relevant projects enhance engagement and learning, and how different types of assessment can improve retention without sacrificing student well-being. We will also look at the importance of a caring, safe school environment, and how to educate all stakeholders to make lasting and effective change. Throughout the book we'll provide tools and templates you can use at your school site, and we offer case studies from Challenge Success schools that implemented

changes aligned with the SPACE categories. We offer these very detailed descriptions and resources so you won't need to reinvent the wheel on your own and can learn from the experiences, mistakes, and successes of others.

This book is actually an example of what we mean by the E in SPACE: educating teachers, students, and parents about the importance of creating a school schedule, curriculum, and climate designed for every child to succeed. For schools that may already have some of these best practices and school components in place, this book offers ideas on how to extend and improve these practices at your site. We provide the latest research in each chapter, so you can explain the rationale behind your policies and beliefs to parents, students, and new faculty members. For schools that have not yet made some of these changes or that are in the midst of contemplating a new reform effort, this book can serve as a practical, step-by-step guide on how to enact effective policies and practices to increase student well-being and engagement with learning. We hope you will find each chapter and tool to be useful, and that you'll be inspired to try our suggestions in your communities—and let us know what happens.