

CHAPTER ONE

The Battle Begins

We trained hard . . . but it seemed every time we were beginning to form up into teams we were reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any situation by reorganizing, and what a wonderful method it can be to create the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.

—*Gaius Petronious (cited in Fullan, 2001, p. 43)*

Welcome to the world of educational reform. For almost 20 years I have been working in one of America's toughest institutions, our public high schools. It took nearly 17 of those years before I was struck with an image to match the sentiment of Gaius Petronious, that of being on a "hamster wheel," running in place, being accepting of a status quo, with little expectation for success and even less of a commitment to continuous growth and improvement.

As we will see shortly, for more than two decades America's schools have been asked to change, to reform themselves. From this paragraph onward, every time you read the word "change," or "reform," or "redesign," read it not as change for change's sake but as taking the opportunity to continuously improve. The words of Gaius Petronious, spoken nearly 2,000 years ago, could easily serve as the snapshot that captures the never-ending cycle of stabs at improving high schools. This is a book that asks you to break with the illusion of progress and make a commitment to a process of reform that leads to effective practices in teaching and learning. It won't happen over night; ask Gaius Petronious.

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Hamster Wheel is a tool for change. It provides a rich mix of real-life stories from the field coupled with solid educational research on schools and effective organizational change strategies. The data speak to the urgent need for schools to ask and answer hard questions. Through the remainder of this book, we'll take a look at the body of research on reform and provide schools with the mettle to refine their mission, develop strong leaders, focus on their own data, and build a community that succeeds for students and faculty alike.

Looking back at the relationship I had with my very first high school system client, the District of Columbia Public Schools, I suppose that the writing of this book began there. As a beginning consultant, I was hired to help create the first "career academy" at Anacostia Senior High School. The Anacostia community of southeast D.C. had a proud tradition of civic leadership, as demonstrated by men like Fredrick Douglass; an ugly current-day counterbalance image as the most crime-ridden section of the nation's capital; and a high school that was failing.

In 1990, I knew little about matters of urban failing schools and how they are affected by the broader context of legislation, socioeconomics, race, culture, and a social climate that expected that the children enrolled in *this* high school, and indeed in most urban systems, would fail. Couple this inexperience with the fact that I actually didn't know what a "career academy" was, and it is amazing that I was hired. Yet, "the white girl," as I was often called, was hired for her successful history of developing teacher training programs, developing strong partnerships for school systems, and for having a stubborn belief that *all* students deserved a high quality education. When I was hired I committed to a quest that continues to this day. How do we create and sustain not just a program but also an environment where there is in place a shared set of high standards, beliefs, policies, practices, and automatic responses that creates a *school culture* that reaps real rewards for *all* students?

The Anacostia adventure was one I took along with a small group of innovative educators. Our challenge was great. We had to change plummeting graduation rates (approximately 19%, if you looked at 9th through 12th-grade transition), high absenteeism, and poor postsecondary performance for the high school's students. Through countless "after church lets out" Sunday meetings and late afternoons at the school, we created the Public Service Academy. I had the extraordinary privilege of working with Howard Brown, Telford Anderson, James Dickens, Eddie Mims, Virginia Moore, John Stone, Sue Thomas, and Zavolia Willis. We imagined; we argued; we planned; we fought; we studied; we experimented; we failed; we watched our data; and we never questioned "the union contract." As we

grew both more confident and more aware of our skill gaps, we engaged university and government partners in our work. We were each our own worst enemies and each other's greatest supporters. We would give our lives for the program and its initial 41 students. We absolutely believed that we could, *and should*, do absolutely everything in our power to deliver a high-outcomes education for the students for whom we had such high expectations. Yet, I am embarrassed to say that our "high expectation" in those first years was simply that the students would stay in school and graduate.

We knew it wouldn't be easy. It was an uphill battle against the low expectations so many had for "*those* Anacostia students." It was a battle against the status quo of failed reforms, of the rotation of principals and superintendents, and of mid-course changes in funding streams. It was a battle to learn all we needed to learn to create a "career academy." The only available examples were in Pennsylvania and California, and the studies at that time weren't showing us that these were proven programs, just promising ones.

We also had to fight the jealousy of the "non-academy" teachers. Ours was a "pocket" or stand-alone program. This was before the days of "wall-to-wall" whole-school reform. "School as usual" was still the norm for the majority of the Anacostia student body. We realized that when the non-academy teachers saw the gains in attendance and positive student behaviors, they perceived our students as "specially selected." They were jealous of the increased business partnerships and the opportunities our students had through job shadowing. Being in Washington, D.C., we worked hard at incorporating these important work-based opportunities into the curriculum to add relevance to our instruction and to provide an opportunity for our students to see themselves in multiple work venues. Not many students can talk about tap dancing with Vice President Al Gore in his office; or about having lunch in the White House, just under the Oval Office, with Thurgood "Goody" Marshall, Jr.; or about watching tiger surgery at the National Zoo; or about meeting with Mayor Marion Barry. Our students did! Other teachers questioned us as we worked as a team. This was something unprecedented in the late 20th century and is still something only hoped for in most American high schools. Our task included both battling and engaging our own community. We had to get the message out to our own faculty that the student selection was indeed random. The kids were changing because of how we treated them! Our basic curriculum approach hadn't changed; our expectations and how we dealt with students and their families did. We now realized that it would take a team approach, and the broader community, to help us raise these

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children into the adults they themselves dreamed of being, even if we were uncertain of all the outcomes.

We were constantly battling our own fatigue. We were also battling a dearth of resources. Our students came to us with so many challenges. Of our initial class of 41, I believe only two students read at grade level. All could qualify for free and reduced lunch. Some of our students came to us from the dire circumstances of homelessness and violence. Still others came from the more traditional, solid, two-parent working families. By student report, their greatest need was for grief counseling. Too many of their friends and relatives fell victim to the violence of the streets each week. The students voiced hopes for five years after high school when they imagined themselves doctors, or vets, or government workers. More commonly, they hoped simply to be alive. We nurtured their positive aspirations, knowing that if they could not see their future they risked not having one. We needed to find clothes, food, and social services for these students. We provided “college buddies” through the unfailing support of Dr. Kathy Newcomer at George Washington University’s School of Public Policy and Public Administration. We had to do what English teacher Sue Thomas suggested: “provide the services that we can’t count on the home doing any more.”

It was a mammoth undertaking to pioneer working in teams, engaging the guidance department, marshalling community resources, and focusing on what we taught and how we taught it. In an attempt to better understand the student experience, there was the horrific weekend when we all took the SAT exam along with them—and subsequently had to deal with our results.

At one point, I wanted to walk away. The challenge was too great. We weren’t making the progress I thought we should. And, quite frankly, the battles were too hard. A school official took me aside and said, “Progress doesn’t matter. Honesty, integrity, and merit don’t matter. What matters is taking the money and getting at least at the surface of the job.” With that attitude, I knew we were in trouble. There were some among us who believed the status quo was acceptable, that, indeed, it could not be changed. They believed that somehow it would be acceptable if we just looked like we were trying, or worse, that the system would be forgiving if we failed.

We were at what Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point* (2002) would call, well, a tipping point. We wanted to believe that we could create the “magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.” We were either going to tread water or we were going to push the envelope and be about success

for children. I put a large poster from the Computer Curriculum Corporation over my desk that said, simply, “Expect great things!” It represented a commitment to what we were trying to accomplish for *all* students.

Luckily, there was some groundswell of support for our work at Anacostia, and the student data we were closely monitoring proved we were making important gains. We stayed the course. Four years later, we had a 93% graduation rate, which we were able to maintain for several years. Most of the students went on to college. Many had scholarships, some with money from a fund established by our advisory board chairman, John Stone. We were able to document that five years after their graduation, 84% of the students we located were either in college, at work, or dually engaged. That success caught the attention of Hedrick Smith and resulted in the PBS documentary “Across the River.” It brought national attention to the Public Service Academy and the many rich and positive aspects of life in this beleaguered Anacostia community. We were also “studied” under the microscope of the nationally recognized Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation’s (MDRC) research project on career academies. Based on our work, the entire Anacostia High School went “wall-to-wall,” with every student in an academy beginning in September, 1996. In subsequent years, we were asked to replicate the Anacostia project at five other D.C. schools and at one of their adult education centers. We were studied, at Phelps High School, under the RAND Corporation’s academy study with additional positive results (Elliot, Gilroy, & Hanser, 2002). The momentum for school reform—the focus on high school improvement—was growing nationally, and the lessons learned from the work of these dedicated teachers and administrators was adding valuable research to the development of reform. The work continues in D.C. today. In mid-2004, Washington, D.C. received a Federal Small Learning Community grant with the goal of bringing similar success to all district schools.

All these years later, the lessons learned at Anacostia are the ones that still have the greatest impact for the direction of my work. Every school and district has “those” kids, and every school and school district can do better for *all* kids. It is hard, but it isn’t rocket science. In my first book, *Creating and Sustaining Small Learning Communities* (2000), I was able to couple the lessons learned from Anacostia with those from other schools to create a step-by-step guide for schools on how to look at, develop, and evaluate the creation of smaller learning communities. It was naïve to think that it would be a terminal work. The pace of high school reform is unrelenting; much has changed since I published that book. We

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understand that change is not an event but a process. We know a lot about adherence to data and developing structures in tandem with a focus on instruction. We know more about vision, mission, planning, and leadership. We see the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and of severe cuts in educational programs that will challenge reform efforts. We know now that effective reform is definitely not about creating or implementing a program. We know that smaller learning communities, career academies, advocacy or advisory programs, or extra help academic supports, when implemented as stand-alone programs operating in a vacuum of the larger picture of school reform, will not reap the rewards of a systemic approach. Those of us deeply involved in this work know that only a systemic overhaul of the American high school will increase teacher effectiveness and academic outcomes for *all* students.

In the broadest sense, we are talking about an overhaul that will create good high schools for all students. In my organization, GMS Partners, Inc., creating a good high school means focusing on *just* five things: data and mission management; creating personalized communities for teaching and learning; having a laser-like focus on a high standards curriculum; developing strong parent, community, and postsecondary partnerships; and creating a climate for success.

A climate for success demands

- A clear mission and vision,
- Achievable and aligned school plans and resources,
- Appropriate professional development,
- Truly shared and empowered leadership,
- A commitment to continuous improvement, and
- A climate of respect for school staff and students alike.

Creating these schools requires hard work and significant change. While I would like to believe that the change process can be a step-by-step linear one, it is in fact quite messy. To build from Michael Fullan's work, there is no easy way to push through either the social-psychological fear of change experienced by educators or the lack of technical know-how or skills to make the change work (Fullan, 2003, p. 41).

The change, or high school reform movement, is being fueled by some pretty big players. The U.S. Department of Education (USED) is revising one of its largest high school and postsecondary programs, the Carl Perkins Act, and it is forging new partnerships with the U.S. Department of Labor in an effort to both improve educational options for students and improve the workforce of the future. In addition, USED has been

channeling approximately \$420 million per year, over the course of five years, into the Smaller Learning Community Program. National funders such as the Annenberg and Carnegie Foundations are pumping millions of dollars into reforms in key places such as Atlanta, Boston, Chattanooga, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, and San Francisco. Local funders are also deeply committed to a change process. In Baltimore City alone, local funders contributed more than \$10 million for the benefit of just nine neighborhood high schools. Of course, the big gorilla in the room when it comes to funding high school reform is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which, by July 2005, had contributed more than \$2 billion to education, of which \$700,000 had gone directly to high schools. It's not just a question of the funding. NCLB, regardless of how it may be amended, will only demand an increase in high-stakes testing and student outcomes before students will be allowed to graduate.

Increasingly we are seeing books, conferences, Web sites, and articles that focus on the state of today's high schools. The focus began under U.S. Education Secretary Terrell Bell with the National Commission on Excellence in Education and its now-famous report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The report did not shy away from describing the poor performance of American students in international comparisons and the continued gaps between poor and minority students and white students. It demanded that all students receive a rigorous academic curriculum. Ever since, our educational system has been involved in a critical transformation. The dialogue continued in the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP) 1996 report, *Breaking Ranks*, which outlined the need for high schools to be learning communities that provide effective transition into postsecondary learning and work. The report advised high schools to support students in their personal development and "unabashedly advocate for young people." In spring, 2004, NASSP released *Breaking Ranks II*, which adds even more to what we know and should be able to do for students in our schools. This report focuses on three core areas: sowing the seeds for change through collaborative leadership, professional learning communities, and the strategic use of data; personalizing the school environment; and making learning personal through the lens of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (NASSP, 2004, p. xi).

There are many excellent books and Web resources on effective schools and on effective organizations. Most of the literature pays homage to the craft of teaching and the dedication of teachers. Yet, as educators we are being asked to reinvent our industry and ourselves. All of these resources call for a reform of the educational process, as do our central

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administration buildings and federal mandates. Depending on which educational reform camp you belong to, this means that the American high school needs to undergo reform, reinvention, redesign, conversion, reconfiguration, transformation, or, as one Texas educator noted, *obliteration*. No matter which moniker you use, there seems to be at least one consensus: schools, as they currently exist, need to change.

But why change, and to what?

Like many of you, I have, over the course of 18 years of working in high schools, seen reform initiatives come and go. I have witnessed educators meet with varying degrees of success and have participated in national debates focusing on the status of the American high school. At no time in the history of education have the stakes been raised so high concerning the education of all of America's children. Educators at the federal, state, district, school, and classroom level, as well as researchers, technical assistance providers, and community groups, are all grappling with how to make their reform initiatives work. However, the beliefs, policies, and practices—the culture of schools, and particularly that of high schools—have not helped schools meet with success. Some educators are waiting so that they can, as one teacher in Louisiana said to me, “just get back to the business of teaching.” The problem with that statement is that the business of teaching has changed. Teaching is not about going to our classroom and mastering just our subject matter. It is about addressing the needs of the whole child, working in collaboration with our colleagues, and committing to our own continuous improvement at the craft we call teaching. We can no longer work in the isolation of our classrooms or in isolation from a changing world culture and the reforms it requires. “Isolation,” as former New York City District 2 Superintendent Tony Alvarado states, “is the enemy of improvement” (cited in Silva & Mackin, 2002, p. xi). Too many of us are clinging to a paradigm that can no longer exist. The research bears out that our students are not excelling and the reforms are meeting with only mixed success. Too often, the culture of schools has educators engaged in a cycle of reforms that keeps them running without making the progress the reforms seek to attain.

Tony Wagner, in *Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools* (2003), calls to the front of the education dialogue key questions regarding the structures of schools meeting the needs of today's students. As we will see in Chapter 3, he is absolutely committed to asking and answering the hard questions that make for successful schools. He eloquently pushes the envelope on a debate about creating a good high school and the leadership that reinvention takes. He also states, however, that the schools in America have not failed. Data proves we are actually educating more

students than ever before. Looking at one indicator, we see the math SAT has recently reported the highest national scores in 30 years. “Schools aren’t failing,” states Wagner; indeed, “schools haven’t really changed—for the better or the worse. The world has.” Wagner finds that drawing a distinction between school failure and schools that are not meeting their mission because they have become obsolete is a critical difference that helps educators understand the magnitude and nature of the challenge (Wagner, 2003, p. 136). Stanford’s Linda Darling-Hammond pushes the need for change from a different perspective in *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools that Work* (1997). She puts forward that

in the eyes of most educators, parents, employers, and students, our educational system is failing. Rigid and bureaucratic, it was never designed to teach all children effectively, to teach learners in all their varieties, to attend to each child’s particular mix of aptitudes and barriers to learning. (p. 25)

In Darling-Hammond’s view, we have solid research that says we are lagging as a nation.

Students in high-achieving states like Iowa, Minnesota, and North Dakota do as well in mathematics as those in high scoring countries like Korea and Japan, while students in low-achieving states like Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi do far worse, ranking at the bottom of the distribution. (p. 25)

The changing demographics of society and a changed economic climate are placing new demands on the educational system.

Without laying blame on anyone’s doorstep, it is clear that we are losing ground. In the middle of the 20th century, approximately 20% of all U.S. jobs required training beyond high school. As we settle into the 21st century, high school dropouts have only a 33% chance of even finding work. If they do find employment, they will earn less than half of what they would have earned in 1968. Studies show that as many as 60% of employers and university professors believe that high school graduates do not have the requisite skills to compete and contribute effectively in the job or education arenas. We are failing too many of our students.

Thomas Toch summarizes the history of the American high school and the challenge our educational system and students face in his *High Schools on a Human Scale: How Small Schools Can Transform American Education* (2003). He states,

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- The basic blueprint for high schools hasn't changed since the rise of the comprehensive high school nearly a century ago. (p. 1)
- The comprehensive high schools were created to do something quite different from what we want and need high schools to do today. (p. 1)
- The utilitarian system . . . served the purpose of the nation's industrial economy. High schools served as sorting machines, preparing students very differently for roles in the workplace. (p. 3)
- The new economy requires a new and different priority: that nearly every student be educated well enough to enter college. (p. 5)
- The anonymity that pervades many public high schools saps students' motivation to learn and teachers' motivation to teach. (p. 7)
- For many students, large comprehensive high schools are joyless, uninspiring places. (p. 10)
- For a majority of students, particularly African American and Hispanic students and those from disadvantaged families, a large, comprehensive high school is an educational dead end, where low expectations and tracking swell enrollment in [the less demanding academic] courses. (p. 9)

Other researchers support Toch's work and point to high schools as bleak and joyless places for students. A recent *USA Today* "Snapshots" titled "School Day Doldrums" reported that for 11% of students between 8 and 18, every day in school is a bad day (Bryant & Liu, 2003).

Given the growing focus on high schools, some will believe we are in an education crisis; others will say we simply need to tweak a few things for *some* students. But regardless of the perceived needed level of change, we are losing far too many of our students to the nation's "drop out factories" (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. 5), and we are able to document far too many students, even in our "high-performing schools," as disengaged from their learning and their futures. The numbers are too high, on both counts, to allow America to remain competitive in a global economy. And they are too high, I believe, to allow any of us a good night's sleep, as we will see in Chapter 2. This unsettling reality challenges educators, the overwhelming majority of whom entered the profession out of a commitment to children's learning.

Given this reality, you might think we need to determine anew what makes a good high school; however, the practitioners and researchers have already done it. We'll delve into the details later in this book. For now, we have a significant body of knowledge that says the good high school is

- Small, or provides the sense of small,
- Committed to high academic expectations for *every* student,
- Personalized, where students are known well by adults,
- Committed to ongoing study and collaboration in the instructional practice of the educators and administrators,
- Focused on instruction and has multiple forms of assessment,
- Providing extra help and advisory support for students,
- Centered on a culture where everyone's voice, even the students', is heard and respected,
- Working under a thoughtful plan that aligns improvement and reform efforts, and
- Seriously committed to continuous improvement regardless of how high they already score on their state's test.

I contend that while ongoing research is critical to our success with schools, we already have all the books, articles, and basic research that tells us what we should be doing for schools. Certainly, there is the broad national context of politics and community practice that impacts this work, but the core question is, "If we know what it is we are trying to create, why do we find school reform such a difficult and onerous process, and why are we not attaining the measurable and sustained goals that we set?" It is not for lack of a skilled faculty. I believe we have competent educators. It is not, as we may wish to believe, a crisis of finances. Despite what some may say, the lack of resources is rarely specifically financial. We are not underfunded in American education; indeed, compared to Germany, France, Japan, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, the United States spends, on average, 45% more per pupil on education.

My hypothesis is simple: we have neither recognized that the schools we have created can no longer serve the needs of all students nor have we made a commitment to build the capacity of our educators to make the necessary changes in the schools to meet with success. Educators are steeped in a culture that has not, traditionally, required innovation or change. Adults alive today were bred in an educational tradition that was designed to allow for the masses to take their places in an economy and culture that no longer exist. We work in a culture that has allowed isolationism. We have not demanded attention to student data. We have not paid attention to results for all students. We have not kept pace with a changing society, and we have not had the courage to hold each other accountable for student and school success. In education, and in many other industries, we have become so focused on the multiple tasks of our work, the amount that is

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expected of us, the demands of our families and our society, and the pace of our lives that we have not stopped to take stock of whether we are actually accomplishing *the mission* of our organizations.

It is not the knowing what to create that stymies us, it is the knowing how. Frederick Hess, director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, recently wrote that

the crisis is that the performance we deemed adequate 50 years ago is neither tolerable nor defensible today. The crisis is that too few of our schools are excellent, so many are mediocre, and yet, we, the adults responsible, are content to tinker and theorize. (Hess, 2004, p. 2)

Hess's reality hit home for me in the spring of 2003.

I had grown a lot as a school reformer since my Anacostia days. I'd written *Creating and Sustaining Small Learning Communities*, become a "national speaker," created a national nonprofit organization focused on career academies, and published articles. I continued to work at some of the nation's toughest schools and some wonderful ones—and, sometimes, they were both at once. I had already worked in more than 30 states in urban, suburban, and rural communities and on Native American lands. I had begun to work not only at the school level but also at the district, state, and federal levels of education. I learned as much from schools as I brought to the table. The level of risk, creativity, and commitment that district and school administrators, as well as classroom teachers, voiced for reform work always impressed me. I had had the great opportunities to work with Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development High Schools, the Small Schools Workshop, and the Education Alliance at Brown University, as well as the Southern Regional Education Board's High Schools That Work. GMS Partners, my company, now had a team of seven qualified educators and reformers who made our successes possible. We had learned the lessons of sensitivity to culture and the process of organizational change. We had mastered, as close as anyone can, how to identify, be sensitive to, and be inclusive of negotiated agreements and union contracts. We had developed protocols, workshops, and tools. We had refined our coaching style. We knew that real change needs to be supported from "the top" and grown in the school with the principal and in each classroom. We understood that a good principal mattered—a lot—but nothing outweighed a dedicated group of good teachers. So, imagine my surprise one lovely spring evening in 2003.

I sat in a meeting in Maryland with a dedicated and committed school improvement team. In my opinion, that school had won the prize. They

had a new school, a new visionary principal, committed business and postsecondary partners, involved parents, a rich balance of “seasoned” and new faculty, the time and support to meet each week, and they had inherited a student body of just 700 students. In addition, they had received multiple grants from the Gates Foundation, local sponsors, and the Federal Smaller Learning Community program. They had a rigorous mission statement, a supportive superintendent, and a High School Steering Committee.

In my role as technical assistant, or TA provider, it was my job to meet with the group each week as we added depth to a design that required us to create a school that was committed to just three things:

- Small supportive structures,
- Academic rigor, and
- Effective leadership and instruction.

We met tirelessly for five weeks from 3:00 until 6:00 P.M. We worked hard. We imagined; we argued; we planned; we fought; we studied. (Sound familiar?) We had minutes of our meetings, printed agendas, handouts, e-mails, a library of resources, a paid facilitator, and “the white girl” (as I was still called). We had the really nice, and all-important, binder for our “School Reform Committee,” and, most important, we had *snacks*.

In week five, however, I realized *we had actually also made no progress*. We continued to rehash old decisions; we brought new folks up-to-date; and we re-thought, re-discussed, and re-fought old battles. We fretted about football teams and chorus more than we ever did about the students’ needs and quality of instruction. We had not gotten to the important questions of structures, rigor, or leadership. We had not gotten to the deeper discussions needed about academic achievement, professional community, and data-driven decisions.

I had the disquieting sense that everyone was actually quite satisfied with the “progress” we were making. Indeed, if I had stopped to do a survey, I am sure that the participants would have rated our reform process “successful.” After all, we had agendas, and minutes, *and binders, and snacks*. We were operating as we always operated. Indeed, we were in the process of simply creating a smaller version of the larger school of which we were once a part. If surveyed, folks would have politely smiled and nodded that we were on the right road. And in their assent they would have provided support for the silent voice that so often kills reform.

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In an epiphany I had the blazing image of a hamster on a wheel. You know, those adorable little animals that spend their lives running endlessly on their exercise wheels, ultimately going nowhere. In that moment, I knew we were on our own hamster wheel. We were running in place; we were not on a road to success. If I closed my eyes I could almost hear the soft, squeaky, incessant “*whirr, whirr, whirr*” of the wheel spinning. What was worse for me was that I knew I no longer had any expectation that we would move forward. I had indeed just hopped right up on the wheel with this team. *Whirr! Whirr! Whirr!*

The school in Maryland was not an isolated instance. Let me provide a snapshot of my more challenging experiences with high schools:

- A principal called me from Florida and said she heard that I was an expert in school reform. She said that she needed help with that. When I asked what her data was telling her, what she believed we should be concentrating on, and what the ultimate result of her reform would be, her response was, “I am not sure. I was told I had to do school reform so I have to reform this school. What can you do to make that happen?”
- A school in Louisiana called. They were in the second year of an implementation grant. They were hoping that I could come down and help them *begin planning*. They hadn’t been ready to do the work before.
- I called a school that I was working with in Michigan because I had heard that a student had shot himself in the building that day. The assistant principal was puzzled by my call. She indicated he had “*just been playing with the gun in his pocket*” and it had gone off, injuring his leg. For this school, this was routine.
- A colleague from a large midwestern city called to bemoan district strategy. It was the fourth week of school. Tomorrow was to be the all-important “count day,” the day that numbers are registered for school populations and funding cycles. The city was more than 25,000 down in their count. None of the special education children had yet received bus transportation for the year, and thus they had already missed four weeks of school. In an attempt to ensure attendance on count day, ice cream coupons were promised to all students, and buses were hired for special education students; however, parents had not yet been notified of the bus schedule.
- One of my clients was about to turn back \$400,000 in unspent funds to the grantor without so much as an inquiry regarding extending the work.

- A school system in Louisiana reported that it now had all of its students in smaller learning communities because they had changed their bell schedule to a block schedule.
- In Detroit, four out of ten of the principals we worked with buried students during a one-week period of cross-city violence.
- In a suburb of New York City, a school working toward the creation of a 9th grade voted it down when one teacher did not want to move her classroom.
- In an Oklahoma school, the students were supporting 90-minute block scheduling because their teachers were “so efficient that they could still teach everything needed in 45 minutes; then they, the students, had another 45 to study or do homework.”
- In the central part of the country, a faculty was complacent about the fact that they had 460 freshman and only 169 seniors. They were eager to blame the loss of students on mobility, but no one there could cite the mobility rate.
- During a late-winter school observation in the south, I saw a student shrinking, almost literally, into a wall and another in the same class sound asleep. When I questioned what was going on the teacher mentioned that those two students had indicated back in the fall that they would be dropping out on their 16th birthdays in the spring, so she saw no reason to continue to work with them.
- A high-performing school in Iowa contacted me to discuss increasing personalization for their students. After conducting a community survey, they had determined that most parents would be satisfied if “more students have the opportunity to become homecoming queen.”
- A school in the south contacted me, excited that they had, at last, chosen a theme for their first smaller learning community. “We’ve decided on a jewelry academy!” (With my sometimes-odd sense of humor, I thought, “Well, the homecoming queens in Iowa would think that was a good idea.”) What I said, of course, was “Have you considered how such a program would engage all students to high standards, build relevancy, and transition students to a wide and successful range of postsecondary experiences?”

Whirr! Whirr! Whirr!

I have been spending a lot of time observing, reflecting, prodding, and studying what I now call the “hamster wheel phenomenon.” Sadly, it seems to resonate with many of the schools with which I work and the

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organizations that I have studied. I realize, as they do, that many of our best-intended and hard working schools are still fighting the battles we fought at Anacostia, but now the stakes are even higher. Educators are still trying, but they are not seeing the gains their state mandates, mission statements, and hearts tell them they should. Since you've picked up this book, I have to believe that you may have had similar experiences and that you believe, at least in part, that we are not winning the battle for effective systemic reform. I still have that "Expect Great Things!" poster hanging in my office. Perhaps it was Pollyanna-ish to expect the attitude that it helped engender in me to last, but for 17 of my 18 years working in schools, it worked.

I am hard on teachers, and I am hard on schools because I know we can succeed, and I know how we can get off the wheel! I want our children to be the successful lifelong learners our mission statements say they will be. But, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "The future will depend on what we do in the present." Change and continuous improvement will not happen without a focused approach. Throughout this book, I paint an honest picture of high schools based both on my experience and the national data, yet I worry that you will take offense at my honesty. I worry more that schools will continue to write unattainable plans and orchestrate extensive, disconnected staff development. I worry that educators will continue to go to conferences, read good books and articles, and hire good consultant support but still fail to get to the place where they see reform with results. While the picture I paint is sometimes bleak, it is not one without hope. Through working with schools that care about their work, through research, and by listening to students, I believe we have found a successful focus for reform and redesign. Educational research, proven practices in organizational management, and a commitment to real outcomes for students provide what we need. These factors help us to set a mission and build the capacity of all involved.

As a nation, we are being asked to change our schools. We can no longer, if we ever could, settle for the status quo. The question is "Do we have the courage to do it?" Frederick Hess (2004) states, "*Status quo reformers* believe that the nation's millions of teachers and administrators are already doing the best they can and the only way to improve America's schools is to provide money, expertise, training, and support" (p. 4). In this book, I state that I know what it's like to be there. Thankfully, because of the students and the excellent teachers I have met and worked with, I know there are ways to get off the wheel, but it's still a battle. We know what we want for our schools; however, too often we do not create a climate for success that allows that vision to take hold.

The Battle Begins 17

As educators, we are on a shared journey. Welcome to my world! Two hundred days a year on the road working with schools in 32 states; I am entering my 19th year as a reformer. I see educators working hard. Many are running on that wheel. But we can't let them stay there—we cannot leave them alone. Indeed, most do not want to stay there! We must be like Don Quixote who, many thought, battled just windmills. We must battle the status quo and the low expectations so many have for our schools and organizations. We must acknowledge that even we sometimes believe the system is unbeatable. We must fight the temptation to hop on, stay on, or allow others to be on a hamster wheel. I invite you on my journey and that of the schools I have had the great privilege of working with. Together, we will learn to battle and win against the hamster wheel!

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.

—Mahatma Gandhi

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The Battle Begins

- The terms *change*, *reform*, *reinvention*, *redesign*, *conversion*, *reconfiguration*, *transformation*, or *obliteration* are really all about a commitment to continuous improvement of educational practice that reaps rewards for all students.
- Change is a process, not an event.
- It's not about creating a program but a systemic overhaul of the policies and practices in place in the high school.
- There are five key areas for focus: data-driven management, personalized learning environments, strong curriculum, deep partnerships, and a commitment to a climate for success.
- A climate for success requires a clear mission and vision, achievable and aligned school plans and resources, appropriate professional development, truly shared and empowered leadership, a commitment to continuous improvement, and a climate of respect for school staff and students.
- We must create schools that are
 - Small, or provide the sense of small,
 - Committed to high academic expectations for *every* student,
 - Personalized, where students are known well by adults,
 - Focused on instruction and have multiple forms of assessment,
 - Providing extra help and advisory support for students,
 - Centered on a culture where everyone's voice, even the students', is heard and respected,
 - Working under a thoughtful plan that aligns improvement and reform efforts, and
 - Seriously committed to continuous improvement regardless of how high they already score on their state's test.
- Educational research, proven practices in organizational management, and a commitment to real outcomes for students provide what we need.