

Foreword

In all my years and experiences I have never encountered a book such as this one. It is, in a word, *superb*. No one has “covered the beat” of student roles in high school reform as Holcomb has. She brings the high school student body, as well as the teachers and the administrators, to life in all their richness and weirdness. We learn of these kids’ angst, their courage, their brilliant ideas, and their commitment to making life and their learning better in their high school community. We learn how the principal began to open doors so that staff, challenged and catalyzed by the students, rallied to improve the conditions and practice of learning in their school.

Holcomb writes with candor and care, with persistence but patience, and with passion and concern about the individuals that inhabit Knownwell High School. We experience the anxiety of Norris; we celebrate the courage of Morris; and we become very good friends with all of the students who represent the broad spectrum of kids in this composite high school. The school, its staff, and the students represent the reality of all those individuals who live in every high school in America, or at least in those high schools that are making efforts to enhance the effectiveness of staff and increase student outcomes.

This work isn’t just a story, albeit a very clever and meaningful one. The author gives us a set of eight “puzzles” that engage our attention and onto which we can hang the subsequent text. A set of four “premises” reveals Holcomb’s beliefs and, consequently, values about the high school and its mission in our education system. With these introductory ideas and notions conveyed, the story begins.

But the story is interrupted at various critical junctures, and Questions for Reflection are provided. These questions invite the reader to reflect on the characters and their actions in the text in order to apply or relate them to the reader’s own situation. These questions prompt the reader to stop and give attention and thought to the shared text of the school journey and how one can use it to inform one’s own educational improvement strategies and activities.

In addition, references and material from the published literature are reported in a section on Content for Consideration. In these sections, sprinkled throughout the manuscript, Holcomb provides supporting information

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and commentary from other writers and projects focused on high school reform and on student roles and participation. These sections give the reader validation that supports the real possibility and effectiveness of the roles and activities in which students may contribute to their school's improvement goals.

Who should read this book? Anyone interested in or actively engaged in secondary school change and improvement is the target audience. This includes those who are internal to the school and those external, such as central office, external assistance providers, or intermediate service agencies, parents, community members. The book nicely balances the chronicle of change with accounts of the research and published literature from academics and scholars. This gives substance and validation to what might otherwise be a pie-in-the-sky narrative.

A most important person for reading this book and considering its possibilities for a school is the principal. It is the principal who, as Holcomb says and the research on the principalship confirms, is the gatekeeper to new ideas and the culture keeper for how things operate or work in a school. The principal's role is easily recognized and understood in Holcomb's book and reflects the reality of change in all schools.

A most important reason for the wide readership of this book is its promotion of the democratic participation of all the players in the school setting, centering on the students. Here, the leaders of today and tomorrow are developed: in creating new ideas for their schools, in learning the necessary skills for promoting ideas, and in honing interpersonal attributes or qualities that support the implementation of the ideas. For many, this premise is new, unknown, and uncomfortable. Holcomb's text has made, for me, the idea of students as stakeholders in the school a most understood and desirable phenomenon. It will do the same for other readers as well.

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