

# Preface

*Students Are Stakeholders, Too!* is the fifth book I've written on change in schools. The others were written with a focus on school leadership teams. As noted in Chapter 2, "Puzzles and Premises," I made reference in the previous books to students as stakeholders represented on the leadership team. But that's about as far as I got. I also referenced use of data, especially in the first and second editions of *Getting Excited About Data*. That almost got me pigeonholed into a reputation as a testing person. I'm not. I'm a passionate holder of high expectations for what can happen in schools when *all* members of the school community work together. And I've been desperately disappointed in the number of examples of where this actually occurs, especially in high schools. In my roles as a supervisor of schools and as a consultant, I have looked for examples that could be models. I wrote this book because I couldn't find them. I found books that included research about students. I found books that, like my own, recommended student involvement in decision making. I found books that summarized what students say when they are asked. I found books about schools that had changed for the better, but they seemed to talk about the roles of the principal only or the staff only. And they might tell about what changes had been made but not how they played out in real time. I couldn't find the book I wanted—so I have tried to write it.

## WHAT THIS BOOK IS

It is the toughest writing I have ever done and took the longest. I didn't have a complete case study to document, because what I had seen were excellent pieces in a variety of places in the United States and Canada. I needed to create a composite, and it needed to flow naturally. It needed to be the story of a journey as it unfolded, and it needed to capture the dialogue and interaction that must occur. I tried to invent a neutral, fictitious setting in which to place all my notes and thoughts, and it was beyond my creativity. So I turned for the physical setting to a school I know well, where many of the things described have actually taken place and where all of them could. And I built around it. Every person in this story is

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modeled after a real person (or many) that I have seen in action. Everything that occurs at Knownwell High School has actually happened in at least one real-life school. I hope this book paints a picture of what can happen when a principal begins to seek and hear student voice and opens doors for greater interaction among adults and students.

**WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT**

This book is not a composite of research about high school reform. Others have done that better than I. It's the story of a high school re-forming.

This book is not fiction, though it is semifictionalized in order to combine a range of settings and experiences. It may seem idealized, but everything that happens here has happened (even students coming forward to confess to misdeeds). If it sounds too perfect, read more closely and you will sense the resistance and barriers. I chose not to dwell upon them, because my purpose is to create a can-do picture, an alternative vision. And I chose not to paint resisters with a broad brush of criticism. The epilogues that close the book were co-written with some of the actual persons upon whom the book's characters are based. Their reflections reveal the real-world challenges that are inherent in change.

This book does not take issue with the value of small schools. (Students who reviewed the manuscript and wrote the epilogues with me were not prompted to discuss the size of their schools, and I was surprised when they did.) My purpose here is to paint a picture of how an ordinary school, with only its existing resources, can engage students and create a student-learning-centered culture. Schools I visited and combined here serve from 200 to 2,000, yet students had remarkably similar things to say.

This book is not written in a formal or technical style. It has been reviewed by several principals who attest to its reality and doability. And it has been reviewed by teenagers, who have helped me use their voice. Over the course of this work, youthful expressions have faded and been replaced with others, but as my granddaughter so diligently reminded me, "Things change faster than you could write the book anyway. But it doesn't sound phony or old." I'm immensely relieved.

This book may not appear to be multicultural, because I have tried and then discarded the use of ethnic names. Each character represents a subset of a student population—from Joe, the "big man on campus," to Mike, the skateboarder, to Teri, the special education student, to Gloria, the almost-gone-Goth. Whenever I tried to attach ethnic names to capture a diverse population, it seemed to stereotype whole groups into specific character types. I stuck with Morris as the name for our Everyman because I was so impressed by Ted Sizer's description of a school from the perspective of teacher Horace—and because I knew the name Morris as that of a hard-working Russian immigrant. Come to America and find your dream. Visit Knownwell High School and see a dream unfold.

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

So that the book can serve many purposes, Questions for Reflection and Content for Consideration have been interspersed. As author, I would ask you to skip them at first and just read the story as it flows—starting in September of Year 3, to set the stage, and then flashing back to September of Year 1 and experiencing the two-year journey without interruption.

Read this book as an idealist and a visionary. Read it as a dreamer. Recall the line from the movie—“Build it and they will come.”

Or read the book as a pragmatist. Look for the practical ways in which time was found and involvement was built.

Or go ahead and read it as a skeptic. Challenge yourself with the reflection questions. Study the Content for Consideration. If you find even 10% believable and feasible, act on the 10%. You will discover more if you take the first step.

Above all, read this book with awe and humility—not for my writing, but for the administrators, teachers, and students who have inspired it. Their actions have assured me that there is a foundation for my belief that students can help us shape better schools—and that, in doing so, they will learn lessons that will help them shape a better world.