

Preface

It is difficult to work in schools today. Students' lives are harder, teachers' hours are longer, public criticism is stronger, and budgets are smaller. Test scores get increased emphasis, and principals are pressured to raise those scores or risk losing their jobs. On many days, educators are struggling just to survive, much less to work toward the ideals that drove them into the profession in the first place.

Newspapers, television news shows, and the online world are filled with stories of schools' failures and of the well-funded efforts of politicians and corporate CEOs to shape schools to their often-ill-informed visions. The best research about how children learn and how organizations meet their goals is ignored by many so-called reformers, while old-fashioned approaches to teaching and supervision are promoted by law and by persuasion. The most creative teachers and principals are too often the ones who are on the firing line, while those who promote rote drill, whole-class recitation, marching in unison, and breaking the curriculum into the tiniest bits get lauded on national news programs and among the corporate elite.

Many students' educations are being whittled down to small pieces of information that they are asked to memorize and report on assessments. The complex tasks of the literate and numerate are simplified to computation, phonemic awareness, and multiple-choice exams. Students are being treated as though they are all the same, with the same standards applied to each, no matter where any particular child began and no matter how much he or she struggles or excels in a particular area. Funding cuts produce larger and larger class sizes, meaning that students are treated less and less as individuals, and the help of other adults, such as teaching assistants and guidance counselors, is decreasingly available. And in many places, the free time of children—after school, on Saturdays, during summer breaks—is being consumed by tutoring, required classes, and more skill-and-drill.

Most teachers choose their profession because they care about kids or they care about their subject matter. Most principals choose their work because they want to make a difference for an entire school. Most school district leaders begin with a vision for how to make a community's schools stronger.

And many of us, no matter what role we have as an educator, find ourselves frustrated when we pause and look at what our work is really adding up to.

I don't begin in this way because I want readers to be depressed. I am describing conditions that every reader likely understands firsthand; the descriptions in the previous paragraphs probably feel all too familiar to most of you. I share them first to connect with you, the reader. I want you to know that I understand how hard it is to work in schools these days. Second, I share them because I want what I write about in this book to be in the context of the struggles we educators face. You see, in the following chapters, I am going to tell you how to make your work life more meaningful and more effective, and I don't want you to think I am being glib or that I am ignoring reality. As a lifelong educator, I understand the struggles in schools today, and when I offer you a way into a more meaningful professional life, I want you to know that I do so with full respect for how hard it is to work in schools and with a clear perspective on what educators control and don't control in their work lives.

So what do I have to offer in the face of the struggles we educators face today?

- I offer a way to shape your work more meaningfully.
- I offer an approach to teaching that emphasizes the reason students are there.
- I offer principals a way to focus on what matters.
- I offer a perspective on testing that will make all educators feel saner.
- I offer work that will give teachers, principals, and district leaders the ability to stand proud in the face of public criticism.

CENTRAL PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is about a return to *learning*. Today, too many educators have strayed from the reasons they entered the profession in the first place, and as a result, they feel exhausted, discouraged, and burned-out. When they again focus on learning, teachers and principals will do more of what matters and less of what doesn't.

I have written this book, then, to help educators attend to learning. I hope the stories in this book will inspire the discouraged, the practical strategies will prompt action in the unsure, and the detailed information will refocus the distracted.

The word to describe this renewed attention to learning is *Learnership*, a combination of the words *learning* and *leadership*. Learnership is about just that—leading for learning, whether that learning takes place in a

classroom or in an entire school. Of course, leadership for learning is needed in school districts, universities, foundations, and legislatures, and learnership, as a concept, applies in those settings as well. However, I choose to focus my attention in this book on PK–12 teachers and principals because the need is strongest for learnership in their roles.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In the chapters ahead, I will teach you how to engage in learnership, how to help others do the same, and how to foster a school that supports learnership. Specifically, in Chapter 1: Introduction to Learnership, I give you an overview of learnership and why it matters. Chapter 2: Look for Learning provides skills to immediately shift your work as an educator by attending to what students and teachers are indeed learning in your school. Chapter 3: Understand Learning focuses on key concepts about learning that enhance the practices of learnership, particularly learning as systemic and as a shift in identity. Chapter 4: Inquire Into Learning provides insights about how student learning is gauged and about the problem-solving cycle that enhances teacher learning. Chapter 5: Put Test Scores in Perspective, offers ways to use test scores to inquire more deeply into learning and roles for principals in helping teachers inquire into what test scores do and don't mean. Chapter 6: Influence Learning describes how disequilibrium leads to learning and gives tactics for taking advantage of this phenomenon. And Chapter 7: Support Learning provides strategies for coaches, participants in professional learning teams (PLTs), and administrators to use in supporting teacher learning. The book closes with Frequently Asked Questions and a Conclusion.

SPECIAL FEATURES

As the pressure on educators increases and teachers and administrators become more exhausted, we have no time to spare. Therefore, I have written this book to prompt immediate shifts in what you think, do, and believe. Each chapter title begins with a verb because I want readers to learn steps that they can take immediately, from the very first chapter. Beyond action, though, I want to help you understand why particular actions make sense. Therefore, I'll support suggested actions with examples and bits of theory and research. For those who want to read more about any particular idea, I have provided a Narrative Bibliography at the back of the book. In this way, each chapter is highly approachable and quick to read, without many citations to disrupt the text, yet the Bibliography discusses further resources for those who want to learn more.

Throughout, I'll provide stories to serve as examples and to promote quicker learning on the part of the reader. These stories are based in the

real-life experiences of educators, including myself, but the details are different than any particular real-life story, in order to adequately honor confidentiality, and the stories are often conglomerations of several educators' experiences in order to make particular points most succinctly. Of course, the names of teachers, principals, students, and schools are made up, also for the sake of confidentiality.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

I intend the readers of this book to be those who are interested in focusing on learning in schools and on providing leadership for that focus. Most of the readers will likely be principals and teachers in school-based leadership roles, such as educational coaches, curriculum specialists, and learning support teachers. However, school district leaders responsible for school improvement and teacher professional growth will find this book extraordinarily helpful, as will school board members and other policymakers who wish to make a real difference. And the myriad teachers who always want to be more effective will find here the perspectives and practices that return them to *sanity* as well as *effectiveness* in their work.

I recognize that some readers will have vast experiences in their own classrooms, schools, and school districts, while others will be quite new to the field of education. Therefore, I offer suggestions that apply to varying levels of experience. For instance, questions to help teachers look for learning in their students are offered in Chapter 2; some readers who have been in the classroom a long time will not need these suggested questions, but those newer to their teaching duties may find them most helpful. Similarly, suggestions in Chapter 7 for creating more effective professional learning teams (PLTs) may be beyond the concerns of new teachers but may be helpful to teacher leaders and administrators with some degree of experience.

WHY SHOULD YOU READ THIS BOOK?

This book will enable you to

- Lead learning in your school, district, or classroom.
- Do what you intended to do when you set out to be an educator.
- Ensure that the children in your trust are benefiting from all that an education can offer.

My learning is enhanced when readers write to me about my books. For this reason, I invite you to contact me with insights, questions, or “yeah buts” at cathy@partneringtolearn.com. Happy learning!