

# Introduction

*Your profession is not what brings home your weekly paycheck, your profession is what you're put here on earth to do, with such passion and such intensity that it becomes spiritual in calling.*

—Vincent van Gogh

We believe that despite the recent onslaught of criticism leveled at teachers and the negative lens through which some of the media have chosen to view our vocation, teaching is still the most noble profession. What other group of people have more power to shape the future by empowering the next generation to think, to create, and to act compassionately toward their fellow man?

We are grateful for our respective journeys in the field of education, and we are adamant about encouraging positive, effective people to join the ranks of educators who still believe we can make significant differences for learners. However, it is becoming difficult to attract competent candidates to the teaching profession and even harder to retain them. In the United States, teacher turnover approximates 20 percent each year, with higher rates for new teachers and in urban areas. Student achievement levels and district budgets are severely impacted by the rising turnover in teacher educators.

In our work with teachers, particularly in the United States, we are witnessing a dismaying decline in their feelings of status and power. A general feeling of helplessness and futility seems to be growing among educators as the public perception of schools reaches new lows. In light of the escalating focus on a never-ending plethora of standardized assessments and newly minted teacher evaluations, educators tell us they have lost their zest for teaching—that special spark that ignites their passion for their particular disciplines and for their students. Administrators tell us they sense a general loss of joy in classrooms as curriculums are defined, scripted, and monitored by those far removed from the classroom.

We do not mean to imply that there are no longer “pockets of excellence” across the nation where both students and teachers embrace their learning institutions as places that are safe, engaging, and generally happy. Each of us can point to schools that offer the best kinds of learning environments for students and are appreciated by the adults who work there as well as the communities they serve. We hope that every school is working to grow toward that kind of quality.

Because exemplary schools are not universal, however, there are policy makers, community members, administrators, parents, and even teachers who have allowed themselves to get caught in the *blame game* in which pointing fingers gets priority over working on solutions. And because most of the pointed fingers of late have been directed at classrooms, some teachers quite understandably have taken a defensive posture as well as defeatist attitude. This negativity helps no one, and as one of our authors likes to say, “We are done with that!”

Together we decided to write a book about how we as educators can take back our power, our joy, and our optimism. For every teacher, the journey to this profession is a complex and unique road. We believe the amazing adventure of teaching is a calling, and it requires ongoing purpose and effort to sustain its viability. We three authors grew up in different parts of the country and taught in vastly diverse school settings, and we each have our own areas of expertise. Nonetheless, we have been friends and colleagues for over two decades, and we share a common belief that a sense of humor, an awareness of personal responsibility, a commitment to purpose, and a feeling of realistic optimism are the keys to sustained fulfillment in this profession.

We do not intend this book to be a giant infomercial about unrealistic cheerfulness. (You will not be asked to purchase a boxed CD collection of our favorite happy tunes, pressured to make a donation to the Just-Turn-That-Frown-Upside-Down Foundation, or be coerced into signing up for a daily e-mail reminder of how much better you have it than the pioneers did.) We understand that no amount of chest pounding, fire walking, or repeating mantras will have teachers saying things like:

“You’re here for an unscheduled supervisory visit from the State Department? No worries. I always like my merit pay observation to be made in my last period class on the day before spring break.”

“I’m sure there’s an excellent reason they are resurfacing our parking lot the day before school starts. I’ll just park in the muddy field three blocks away and make six or seven trips to unload my car. The exercise will be good for me.”

“Johnny, you just fed a box of crayons to the class hamster? Well, look at you—you’ve just provided me with a learning moment to teach about the alimentary canal.”

Probably that kind of levity can only be induced by heavy use of pharmaceuticals, and we are not recommending that (yet). Nevertheless, we believe there are many things educators can do to alleviate some of the basic annoyances as well as the overt and covert challenges we face daily.

In *Deliberate Optimism: Reclaiming the Joy in Education*, we endeavor to help school leaders and their teachers regain a sense power and influence. We believe that a candid examination of how we educators are sometimes our own worst enemy will help us as a group to stop “shooting ourselves in the foot” and start speaking in a collective voice that will be heard. We want our profession to regain its moral calling and teachers to reclaim their joy in doing their jobs.

We respectfully (and sometimes tongue-in-cheek) submit our ideas for our brothers and sisters in the *educationnation*.