# What We Can Learn from Experts

## *It Takes Systems*

Over the last twenty years the national conversation about schools and education has gone from complacent to frantic. Where once we argued about whether schools must improve, today it seems as if just about everyone has an idea for The One Thing that will reinvent, disrupt, and transform education.

Governance changes, reading programs, advanced technology, evaluation systems, "grit," even "mindfulness" all have adherents claiming great powers of transforming schools. No end of programs and fixes are proposed and tried. But even solutions that seem to be successful in one school or district are hopeless failures in another. With no agreed-upon way forward, we seem to be left with an endless churn of debate, recrimination, and increasingly extreme policy proposals.

Yet, all over the country are educators who—quietly and without much fanfare—have figured out how to make schools better. Not just a little better. A lot better. They are ordinary educators in many respects, but they have found ways to marshal the power of schools to help students in a way that seems impossible elsewhere. They are transforming institutions into vibrant places of learning and growth—places where teachers want to teach and children want to learn—and in the process they are keeping the American Dream alive for the next generation.

For more than a decade, I have found such educators by going to regular neighborhood schools that, given their demographics, are expected to be mediocre or low performing. That is to say, they are schools that do not select or screen their students, most of whom are students of color or students who come from low-income families. These schools perform at least as well as white, middle-class schools. Sometimes they perform at the top of their states.

It never fails to amaze me: I walk into schools because of a bunch of numbers, and inside I find passionate, knowledgeable, skillful educators who believe their students are capable of great things and figure out how to teach them.

Many education researchers and commentators call such schools "outliers" and dismiss them as statistical anomalies. This strikes me as bizarre thinking. No engineer in the early twentieth century would have dismissed the Brooklyn Bridge as an outlier. Instead, bridge engineers studied it for the lessons it held. And then they built the even longer Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

Of course, part of the problem is that measurement in education is much slipperier than in engineering. What does it mean for a school to be high performing? Not everyone thinks that the standardized tests we use to see if students can read, write, and do math on grade level are good measures. I would never argue that test scores provide a complete story about a school—no one who has spent time hanging around schools would. But as flawed as they may be, state assessment results provide some baseline idea of how well students are reading and doing math or whatever else is tested; and they, along with graduation rates, give us the only real way to compare across classrooms, schools, and districts. Now that many states are in assessment consortia, we can even compare schools in different states.

It is worth remembering that until we had publicly available data that broke out achievement by schools and demographic groups, the only way we could know anything about what was going on in a school was by physically entering it and walking into every classroom—and even that would yield only brief snapshots of what the school was like.

Now we can, relatively easily, find schools that outperform their peers and then learn from them.

## MINING THE WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

In deliberately seeking out such outliers—I call them "unexpected schools"—I have stumbled upon an amazing vein of educational knowledge, expertise, and skill.

My first attempt to mine this wealth was in *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (2007), which documented the existence of unexpected schools by profiling fifteen schools and one group of schools that were either high performing or rapidly improving.

Back then, people could point to few examples of successful schools that serve students of color and students from low-income homes. Although there had been a rich line of research into what were called "effective schools" in the 1970s and 1980s, it had mostly been forgotten. Most of what the public heard was about highly successful wealthy schools and failing poor schools. The term *low-achieving urban schools* had become synonymous with schools that served black and Hispanic children from low-income families. The few counterexamples that were in the public eye were charter and magnet schools that in some way selected their students. *It's Being Done* provided stories of what were for the most part regular neighborhood schools that struggle with the same issues as other schools but had figured out some solutions.

I identified twenty-five characteristics that I observed were common to the schools, ranging from "they have high expectations for students" to "they are nice places to work." But many educators complained that I had given too little in the way of concrete details about how the schools operated.

I responded with *HOW It's Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools (2009),* in which I profiled eight high performing schools—all with large populations of students of color or students living in poverty. Like the schools profiled in *It's Being Done,* the schools differed in all kinds of characteristics that are sometimes thought to be important. They were big, small, urban, rural, suburban, racially or economically isolated and integrated, elementary and secondary. But in studying them in greater depth, I found they all shared five basic processes:

- They focused closely on what students need to learn.
- They collaborated on how to teach it.

- They assessed frequently to see if students learned it.
- They used data to find patterns and adjust instruction.
- They built relationships.

Nothing is weird or counterintuitive about any of those processes. Each is rooted as deeply in educational research, craft knowledge, and common sense as it is possible to be, and educators around the country aspire to institute all of them. But as simple as those processes are to describe, none of them are easy to do or to put in place, which raised the question of how the educators in those schools had learned to make those processes work meaningfully. At the end of *HOW It's Being Done*, I remarked rather casually that principals seemed to be important.

That statement was hardly daring. It might be theoretically possible for a school to improve without strong leadership, but it is not what could be called an observed phenomenon. In a major study looking at 180 schools over nine years, Ken Leithwood's team at the University of Washington concluded in a 2010 study of school leadership:

> To date, we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership.[1]

But that just raises the next question, which is: What does "talented leadership" mean?

To try to answer that question, I worked with then-director of research at The Education Trust, Christina Theokas, to study thirty-three principals and assistant principals in twenty-four of the schools that had been profiled in the previous two books and a few additional schools to better understand the role of school leadership. That partnership resulted in *Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (2011). Briefly, we found that principals of unexpected schools all share a strong belief in the capacity of all their students, which drives them to do the hard work to ensure the success of their students.

Make no mistake. It is hard work to take in hundreds—sometimes thousands—of children and help all of them meet commonly accepted academic standards. It is difficult even when students come in well prepared and well supported by their families, much less when they arrive

behind and come from difficult family circumstances. Even some of the leaders in unexpected schools occasionally quail at the magnitude of the task they have undertaken. They do what they can because, as one said to me, "we're the only hope they've got." As they demonstrate, what they can do is quite a lot.

## CONFRONTING THE TRADITIONAL WAY SCHOOLS ARE ORGANIZED

I have often found, in talking with teachers in what I call "normal" schools, that they are flummoxed by my descriptions. For example, when I say that in unexpected schools professional development is linked to both the individual needs of teachers and school goals and driven by classroom observations by principals and other school leaders, they will say something to the effect of, "The only time I see my principal is when he's doing a walk-through."

Sometimes I will describe how teachers, together, unpack standards, map out the curriculum, and develop common assessments and the lessons that lead up to them. The conversation stopper: "We don't have common planning times."

In those conversations I have realized there is yet another layer of meaning to be found in unexpected schools, which is that the educators in them have confronted the way schools are organized.

A classic essay on how schools have traditionally been organized was written by Harvard education professor Richard Elmore.[2] When I first read it, I felt the way I did when I went up in an airplane for the first time. I was seeing the same terrain but from a completely new, transformative, perspective. His basic analysis was the fact that teaching has primarily been an isolated, autonomous, idiosyncratic practice puts it completely at odds with any ability to improve schools. As Elmore said, "Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement." As long as school leaders allowed teaching to be a private activity, Elmore argued, school improvement would be impossible.

When the core technology of schools is buried in the individual decisions of classroom teachers and buffered from external scrutiny,

outcomes are the consequence of mysterious processes that no one understands at the collective, institutional level. Therefore, school people and the public at large are free to assign causality to whatever their favorite theory suggests: weak family structures, poverty, discrimination, lack of aptitude, peer pressure, diet, television, etc.[3]

As if to prove Elmore's point, an enormous amount of research in the past fifty years has focused on what students themselves bring to the process—whether their parents are educated, what their family income is, how many books they have in their home, the influence of hip-hop, and so forth. Endless replications demonstrate that—on average—as family socioeconomic status decreases, so does academic achievement.[4]

Disrupting that pattern, Elmore argued, would require organizing schools very differently to open up the teaching process to scrutiny and thus improvement.

That type of reorganization is what I have seen in these outlier schools. By organizing schools in ways that support all the processes I identified in *HOW It's Being Done*—in other words, opening the teaching process to scrutiny and thus improvement—they have been able to disrupt the tight correlation of academic achievement and socioeconomic status.

That is what this book is about.

In the chapters that follow, I will report on my observations of educators who understand how to confront the ways in which schools have been traditionally organized and change them in ways that sometimes seem very simple and yet have profound implications for teaching and learning. I need to make something clear: this is not easy work. For one thing, it requires questioning established systems, which in turn means making people uncomfortable. Schools are human institutions, and they develop ways of operating that are familiar and have a certain logic, even if they're not efficient or successful.

I am convinced that Elmore was right: as long as schools are organized in traditional ways, schools will be entirely dependent on the social capital students bring to their schooling. Schools serving low-income families will for the most part be low performing; schools serving middle-class and upper-middle-class families will appear to be reasonably successful. But I would argue that far too often such schools' overall success masks

significant organizational weakness. Because their students bring with them large vocabularies, substantial background knowledge, and parents who notice and fill in gaps in instruction, high-wealth schools often feel no sense of urgency about improvement and as a result often don't serve their students as well as they could. Such schools' organizational weakness often becomes exposed if their demographics change. Schools that go, say, from serving mostly white middle-class students to serving mostly low-income students or new immigrants are often revealed as institutions that are not in and of themselves "good schools." Rather, they were schools that hadn't needed to marshal their full power as institutions because they had relied on the strength of their students.

We don't generally talk about this issue. The general assessment often is that poor kids and kids of color cause schools to "go downhill." Their parents don't care, they aren't academically inclined, they're exceptionally disruptive—the list of things that is said goes on and on. I saw this type of thinking in the high school my children attended. The once predominantly white, middle-class school had experienced a large increase in low-income students and students of color whose families had been drawn to the area in part by the good reputation of the schools. Many of the faculty and staff openly talked of hoping the good kids would come back and watched neighborhood housing sales to see if their return was imminent. What they *didn't* do was examine their practices to see what needed to change. The dull march through boring and dated textbooks and the tedium of poorly thought-through worksheets continued unabated in many classrooms as it had for decades—and there were no structures in the school that challenged those practices.

That is to say, there was no systematic way to make sure teachers knew what the state standards required students to know; there was no systematic way to ensure that teachers taught to the standards; there was no systematic way to identify those students who had not mastered state standards; and there was no systematic way to recognize which teachers were doing a better job than others so they could help their colleagues. Some individual teachers worked hard to master the standards, curriculum, and pedagogy and develop strong relationships with students; but there was no system to ensure they did. This meant that kids who didn't have the vocabulary, background knowledge, and organizational wherewithal to

compensate for the weak school structures did not, on average, fare well. Some teachers were able to help individual students but by themselves were unable to disrupt the well-worn pattern of academic achievement tightly correlating with family income and ethnicity.

Those weaknesses seem crystal clear after spending time in unexpected schools, but recognizing them requires seeing past the surface of the way schools operate. I talk with many unexpected school leaders who host visitors from other schools and, after showing them around their schools—and talking with them at great length about all the things their schools do—see the visitors take away a small, trivial piece that doesn't in any way challenge them to do things substantially differently. The visitors will, for example, leave resolved to implement the same policy regarding student dress codes as the unexpected school, or buy the specific brand of computers it uses, or adopt a particular math or reading program. On one level this behavior amuses the leaders, but on another it deeply frustrates them. They know that, as almost all of them have told me at one time or another, "It's not about a program."

In this book I am trying to convey what these school leaders do think it's about.

## A JOURNEY THROUGH AMERICAN EDUCATION

Each of the schools and districts I write about could be the subject of its own book. Each has a complicated and in some ways dramatic tale to tell. By gathering all these stories together, I cannot hope to tell everything important about each of them. Rather, I am hoping to provide readers an opportunity to, in essence, accompany me on the remarkable journey through American education I have been lucky enough to take.

### Chapters 1–3: Learning from High Achievement

Chapter 1, "Finding and Uncovering Expertise: Artesia High School, Lakewood, California," describes in some detail the process I used to find Artesia High School—a high-poverty school in Los Angeles County—to give an insight into how it is possible to find schools to learn from through the data. It then describes the remarkable school that I uncovered through the data.

Chapter 2, "'It's Not Just That': Systems at Malverne High School, Malverne, New York," describes Malverne High School—a working-class school in Nassau County where most of the students are African American—that is performing at a very high level.

Chapter 3, "How Malverne Became Malverne: Replicating Expertise at Elmont Memorial High School, Elmont, New York," profiles Elmont Memorial High School, which in many ways was Malverne's antecedent and demonstrates how high performance can be sustained over many years. The first time I wrote about Elmont was in *It's Being Done* back in 2007, so this is an opportunity to revisit a school that has taught me a great deal about school improvement.

### Chapters 4–6: Learning from Improvement

I long ago realized that for educators in regular or low performing schools to read about what I call unexpected schools can be somewhat intimidating. By the time I usually get there, schools have so many systems, initiatives, and processes in place that it is understandable for educators in low performing schools to throw up their hands and say that there is no way they can even think about emulating them.

With that thought in mind, in 2012 I began a process of visiting and observing a small number of schools where expert leaders took on new jobs in low performing schools to lead improvement. In this book I give a few examples to try to convey what the work of school improvement is like as it happens. In the process it is possible to see just how badly organized some schools are and how the ways they are organized undermines student learning.

Chapter 4, "Starting from Scratch: Dr. Robert W. Gilliard Elementary School, Mobile, Alabama," describes the work of Debbie Bolden as she took a school that was widely described as a "hellhole" to a well-established, reasonably achieving school poised for greater success.

Chapter 5, "Experts and Their Systems at Work: Four Stories," describes the work of several other principals as they begin the improvement process.

Chapter 6, "Why Expertise Is Not Enough: A Cautionary Tale," describes the work of Ricardo Leblanc-Esparza and the difficulties he encountered both within the schools he led and in the larger context of his

districts. The first time I wrote about Esparza was in *It's Being Done*, where I profiled the high-poverty high school he led, Granger High School. This chapter demonstrates the way districts can undermine improvement.

### Chapter 7: Could There Be "Unexpected Districts" as Well as Unexpected Schools?

Chapter 6 raised a big question: What kind of ecosystem supports schools in their improvement efforts? That is to say, what systems can school districts and states put in place to support school improvement? This is a hugely important question. I only begin to explore it in this chapter that features Delaware's Indian River School District.

### Chapter 8: Marshaling the Power of Schools

In Chapter 8 I draw on all the previous chapters—and the previous books—to identify the key systems that distinguish all the high performing and rapidly improving schools and districts I have observed.

The educators in unexpected schools, like engineers, have worked the problems that face them by drawing on research and craft knowledge—and by stealing good ideas wherever they find them. In the process they make sure that the ways they schedule time, organize information, handle student behavior, spend money, develop the leadership capacity of their teachers and staff, even how they arrange the physical space of their buildings are all focused on improving teaching and learning. They do this because they know, deep in their bones, their students are able to achieve and they are determined to help them.