How Curiosity, Peer Coaching, and Teaming Can Change Your School
Introduction: Running in Place

Coming up with ideas is the easiest thing on earth. Putting them down is the hardest.

Rod Serling

Let’s step back for moment and survey the current landscape of U.S. education, drawn from recent headlines and news stories. It all seems vaguely reminiscent of a Twilight Zone episode, something Rod Serling might have written and narrated himself:

Picture, if you will, a teacher, commended by her peers and superiors for being among the very best. Her students know her to be tough, but fair. Enter now a principal who says she must alter her grades so more students pass her course. Resistance is futile, the principal says. It’s a directive handed down from on high (Williams, 2015).

Now picture a single square of light shining from a school window late at night. Inside, a school principal is checking boxes on a teacher evaluation form. For one teacher in question, he stares at a particular box: cooperative learning. Although he has seen this teacher’s students learning in groups, on the day of his official classroom observation she taught a good lesson, but the students weren’t in groups. He weighs his decision, then rates her “unsatisfactory.” Later, he’ll admit that his rating was unfair and inaccurate, but he was simply following orders handed down from on high (Anderson, 2012).

Now picture, if you will, a courtroom. A dozen teachers stand trial, accused of doing something verboten in their own classrooms: cheating. They altered students’ responses on the state test to make their own performance look better. The verdict is read: guilty, the court ignoring their pleas that they acted in response to pressure from edicts coming from on high (Fantz, 2015).
You might ask yourself, what is this place?

This is the land of unintended consequences. It is a land where people use outside forces to alter behaviors by handing down edicts, following a kind of outdated groupthink called Theory X. It is a place that lies between the summit of our highest hopes and the pit of our darkest fears. It is a place called here, a time called now. Welcome to the *Twilight Zone*.

Teacher stress.
Student disaffection.
Leader burnout.

These seem to be the plague of our modern system of education. It wasn’t always this way, of course. Many educators recall how, not too long ago, the job was, if not easier, at least less stressful and more joyful. Of course, everything wasn’t necessarily right with the world back then: Many students fell through the cracks; some got a decent education, and others didn’t.

**How Did We Get Here?**

Roughly 30 years ago, with our ears ringing of warnings that we were facing a “rising tide of mediocrity” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and seeing unacceptable gaps between disadvantaged students and others, we set off, with good intentions, down a path of reform with what seemed like a business-minded focus on the bottom line of student achievement. We created standards. We developed assessments. We set goals for the year 2000. Of course, the year 2000 came and went and our goals remained unmet, so we redoubled our efforts, setting even higher goals and tougher consequences to leave no child behind. And who could argue with that?

Yet our current path of reform has had numerous *Twilight Zone*-like unintended consequences. We have consumed educators with making sense of vague standards (Schmoker, 2014) that have been too voluminous to possibly cover in 13 years of education (Marzano & Kendall, 1998). We have created layers upon layers of assessments...
for students, who now take 20 or more standardized tests per year (Lazarín, 2014). Teachers and school leaders now find their performance rated on complex, yet error-ridden, formulas and on assessments that are suspect in and of themselves, especially when (as we’ll see in a later chapter) we can give students a $10 bribe that suddenly makes them appear to be six months smarter.

It’s perhaps no surprise, then, that educators at all levels are under more stress than ever before, resulting in churn among principals and teachers fleeing the profession (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011; Butrymowicz & Garland, 2012; MetLife, 2013; Strauss, 2015). And there’s plenty of evidence to suggest that such high levels of stress—we might call them threat conditions—actually reduce performance, making people more likely to make mistakes and less likely to try new things (Bronson & Merryman, 2013), including the very new approaches we most need to apply now.

Our students, meanwhile, drop out of school when they don’t see how standardized learning is relevant to them (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006), and we respond by creating what New York Times columnist David Brooks (2016) has described as the “mother of all extrinsic motivations,” the grade point average (GPA), which “rewards people who can grind away at mental tasks they find boring” and “encourages students to be deferential and risk-averse” even though what we want from them in life is to be “independent thinking and risk-taking.” And as we’ll see later in this book, the more pressure teachers feel to cover content and prepare students for standardized achievement tests, the less apt they are to encourage student curiosity and engagement—so it’s perhaps no surprise that the longer students stay in school, the less motivated, curious, and creative they become (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001).

Perhaps, though, the biggest unintended consequence of our top-down approach to change has been performance plateaus. As we’ll see in the next chapter, in state after state and district after district—and indeed, across the globe—early gains engendered by
top-down measures begin to fade and performance levels off. Nationwide, the United States has fallen into this pattern. For a decade or more, U.S. students have demonstrated only incremental gains while their peers in other nations, including those that have taken a radically different approach to reform, have seen their achievement continue to rise.

**Is It Working?**

Some might argue, of course, that our top-down “tough love” directed much needed attention to our most marginalized students—focusing our whole system of education on students who were previously falling through the cracks. That much is true. Yet we might ask this question: Has it worked? The answer (which we’ll also explore in more depth in the next chapter) is, well, not exactly.

It’s true that accountability pressure in the United States appears to have helped the lowest performing students in the lowest performing states improve; the pressure has also had some benefits for low-achieving students enrolled in schools under the most pressure to improve (Deming, Cohodes, Jennings, & Jencks, 2016). That’s the good news.

The bad news is that nationwide, achievement gaps appeared to be closing more rapidly before the top-down pressure of high-stakes testing kicked in (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Moreover, in true *Twilight Zone* fashion, there’s evidence to suggest that for many low-performing schools, the increasing weight of tough-love sanctions—including giving students the right to transfer to other schools and providing tutoring services—did little to bolster their performance. If anything, they proved to be a bit like quicksand: the more sanctions were placed on schools, the more their performances sank, finding bottom only after the final and most severe sanction—restructuring, when the school’s principal was usually replaced—resulting in a modest uptick in achievement (Ahn & Vigdor, 2014).
Moreover, despite shining the bright light of accountability on the success of all students, the high school graduation rate in the United States remains below that of other developed nations, and student success is still more strongly tied to parents’ income than in other countries (OECD, 2011). In fact, the United States has proportionally fewer high-performing students than 24 of 34 developed nations (West, 2012).

In short, it would appear that decades of test-driven reforms may have helped a few students at the very bottom perform a little bit better, but has done very little to raise average student performance or propel more U.S. students into the top echelon of performance worldwide. The bottom line is that the educators in the United States appear to be working harder (and believe it or not, spending more on education than nearly every other nation in the world [OECD, 2011]), without much to show for it.

**Right Idea . . . Wrong Response?**

Some might say, of course, that these unintended consequences are not so much a reflection of having the *wrong approach* to accountability (i.e., we ought to stick to our guns) but, rather, the *wrong response* to it—perhaps among a few bad apples. If only those students/parents/teachers/principals would get with the program, some might argue, we’d all be fine. Alternatively, others might think the problem is just that the message still isn’t getting through to these people; we should talk slower and louder, ratcheting up the pressure even more or creating even more precise accountability systems or market mechanisms to drive performance.

As we’ll show in this book—by unpacking decades of psychological research, extensive studies in business and schools, and real-life examples in actual schools and districts—these *Twilight Zone*-like unintended consequences are not simply unexpected anomalies. They are quite predictable outcomes of what’s become for us an ingrained way of thinking about how to drive change in people’s behavior.
Or Maybe It’s Just the Wrong Idea

Granted, in today’s high-pressure, high-stakes environment, educators could be forgiven for being short on patience with seemingly highfalutin theoretical discussions. “Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it” has become a default response for many educators.

We understand that. Yet we also understand something else: Ideas are powerful. How we think about a problem guides how we respond to it, which, in turn, affects the reality we create for ourselves and our students. Some of the most powerful ideas—perhaps even the most pernicious ones—are those that have become so ingrained in our thinking that we hardly pay attention to them anymore.

Behind all our top-down approaches to reform are many unspoken ideas and tacit assumptions that have become so much a part of our mindsets that they seem axiomatic—our default operating system, if you will. And yet, to understand why all of this is happening and how we’ve come to find ourselves in this Twilight Zone, we must step back for a moment and call out the theoretical underpinnings of the reform efforts that are driving us to distraction. Only by putting these ideas on the table, as we’ll do in the next two chapters, can we begin to see that it doesn’t have to be like this; we don’t have to feel this way with all of this pressure and fruitless exhaustion. There is a better way forward.

Getting Unstuck

In many ways, the U.S. education system has gotten stuck in a rut. The top-down approaches that may have worked once upon a time (however briefly or limitedly) just aren’t working anymore. Yet we have remained so committed to them that we keep doubling down on them, finding new ways to ratchet up the pressure on students, teachers, and school leaders, creating ever more complex systems and schemes.

As the saying goes, when you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.
This book is about finally putting down our shovels and finding a way out of that hole. We’ll point to examples from around the world of schools and school systems—including a large, successful effort in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia—that not only point to a better way but also show that it is possible. Beyond that, we’ll provide a straightforward road map for getting from where we are now to where we want to be.

Although some of the ideas in this book may seem radical, we don’t call for a radical dismantling of everything we’ve been doing for the past 25 years. Our point is not to swing the pendulum all the way back to evidence-free approaches to schooling that ignored large swaths of students. Getting clarity about what we want students to learn and seeing how well they’re doing is important. So too is using data to guide our efforts. Perhaps most important of all is focusing on the success of all students to create an education system that lifts people from poverty rather than reinforcing privilege. We should retain all of those important elements of what we’ve been doing.

With all of that in mind, our point is this: We’ve been going about this current approach to reform for nearly a quarter century now, and with the exception of some small pockets of higher performance here and there, student performance overall has not gotten much better than when we started out. So, we could keep doing exactly what we’ve been doing and expect different results (famously called the definition of insanity). Or we could look for a better way forward—one that starts not with a policy edict handed down from on high but, rather, with helping students become more motivated, curious, and engaged and helping teachers find passion and joy in the profession while continually improving their practices. We could also help and encourage school leaders to create environments that feel less like an uninspired bureaucracy and more like a Silicon Valley startup, where people are encouraged to experiment and engage in rapid-cycle improvement efforts.
A Better Way Awaits

If you’re content with the way things are—your students are flourishing, your teachers are happy, and your leaders inspire continuous improvement in your schools—we’re tremendously happy for you. We’ll also spare you the trouble of reading this book: It’s not written for you. Rather, it’s for those who have found themselves feeling burned out, feeling frustrated, or hearing a nagging voice in the back of their heads that asks, *Is this really the right way to do things?*

The book is written for malcontents and people frustrated by what they see, yet not quite sure how to get from their current state of frustration to where they want to be. If you have ever felt like Lassie pawing the ground, desperately trying to get your colleagues, friends, and community members to understand that something has gone badly awry, yet unable to help them see *what* exactly ought to be different about our current system of education, this book is written for you. We hope it’s something you can share with others to spark a conversation, even a movement, in your school community.

Or maybe you feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the multiple mandates being thrown at you and the enormity of the challenge of trying to change so much at once in the name of school “reform”—a word which itself suggests a kind of deficit thinking about people who have dedicated their lives to educating our youth. At times, it can feel a little like trying to turn an oil tanker around in a harbor. At other times, it can feel beyond your grasp. It’s the system—something out there beyond the walls of your classroom, your school, or even your district or state—that’s causing all of this.

How can one person, or an even a small group of inspired people, change all of that? This book will show how one step at a time—through courageous acts that in our current milieu of reform may seem to verge on civil disobedience—we can loosen the chains that bind us and move toward a better system for learning.
Certainly, others have written about these ideas in the past. We don’t pretend to have the lock on good ideas. In fact, throughout this book we will be sharing many other people’s insights and voices. Yet we believe this book still offers something new and different—namely, a more complete picture of what it could look like to pull these great ideas and thoughtful voices together into something resembling a new approach to teaching and learning.

Nonetheless, we know that good ideas, the best intentions, and a stirring vision aren’t enough to effect change. That’s why this book also aims to provide a very practical road map for getting from here there, one step at a time. We will offer plenty of tips, real-life examples, and next steps throughout this book for those of you who share our own practical bent.

We understand these changes won’t take place overnight. The process will be a journey, but a rewarding one. Like climbers ascending a mountain, each bend in the road will provide new vistas that can inspire us to journey on.

So, let’s get started.
When Delivering Well Stops Delivering Well

It isn’t what we don’t know that gives us trouble, it’s what we know that ain’t so.

Will Rogers

In late 2002, professor David Hopkins found himself called to 10 Downing Street to meet with Tony Blair. The prime minister was, to put it mildly, irate. Hopkins, newly minted head of the standards and effectiveness unit at the national education department—essentially the chief education advisor to Blair—found himself in the unenviable position of needing to explain why, seemingly under his watch, national reading and mathematics scores that had once been on a steady upward trajectory had hit a plateau (Hopkins & Craig, 2011).

It didn’t help, of course, that Hopkins’s predecessor, Michael Barber, had a made a name for himself by evangelizing a method known by the tongue-in-cheek moniker deliverology. Known as “Mr. Targets” in the British government (Smithers, 2005), Barber had gotten all schools in the United Kingdom to adopt standardized approaches to reading and mathematics instruction and focused everyone’s attention on delivering the new approaches well (i.e., meeting his famous targets).

The gains had been impressive: Between 1997 (when the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was adopted) and 2000,
the percentage of students testing at proficient levels in reading and mathematics rose from 63 to 75 percent and from 62 to 73 percent, respectively (Olson, 2004). “We got something quite rare,” Barber would later comment, “which is, across a whole system, to get rising average standards and a narrowing of the [achievement] gap” (Olson, 2004).

So successful was his method that Barber, in fact, went on to write a field guide for the deliverology method (Barber, Moffit, & Kihn, 2011) and founded a nonprofit organization in the United States dedicated to its principles, the Education Delivery Institute. Yet shortly after Barber’s departure from the Blair government, something seemed to have gone wrong: Student achievement scores leveled off. They weren’t getting worse, but they certainly weren’t getting better. Across the Atlantic, Education Week picked up on the story, citing it as a cautionary tale for U.S. reformers who were heading down a similar path (Olson, 2004).

Had teachers lost their focus? Had people stopped paying attention to deliverology? No, Hopkins explained carefully to Blair. Nothing had changed. In fact, that was the problem. The performance plateau they were experiencing was quite predictable—a natural result of the top-down approach to reform that the United Kingdom had taken, which had been necessary to begin with, but was now yielding diminishing returns.

“I would make no apology for what Michael et al. did in 1997,” Hopkins told Education Week. To so dramatically move the needle on such a large system “has to be a stunning achievement. But,” he added, “and this is a big but, that was only the first stage in a long-term, large-scale reform. And one of the reasons why we’ve stalled is that more of the same will not work” (Olson, 2004).

To understand why, empirically, that should be the case, let’s back up a bit to understand what we know from research about the complexities of change and program implementation.
Getting from Knowing Better to Doing Better

The first point we must acknowledge is that doing anything well—sometimes referred to as closing the knowing-doing gap—is no small feat. Like most organizations, schools have yet to perfect the art of implementation. Case in point: A few years ago, the U.S. government supported more than two dozen scientific studies of popular interventions through its Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) program. The hope was that in doing so, the so-called regional labs could separate the wheat from the chaff and add the good programs to the newly created What Works Clearinghouse, an online repository designed to provide educators with gold-star reassurance of which programs they could go forth and use with confidence.

There was just one problem with the raft of studies: In every case but one, the popular and widespread approaches, when put under glass, were found to have no positive effects on student achievement (Goodwin, 2011b). If we dig more deeply into those published studies, though, it becomes apparent that in most cases, the programs studied were so poorly implemented that researchers were unable to discern whether the fault lay with program itself or poor deliverology. To wit:

• A study of 2,140 6th graders using Thinking Reader, a software program designed to improve reading comprehension by asking students computer-adaptive questions about young adult novels, found no effects on reading comprehension, yet fully 69 percent of students wound up using the Thinking Reader software less often than the program’s developer has specified; in fact, software usage dropped off so much that by the end of the school year, just 8.9 percent of students actually finished the third and final novel (Drummond et al., 2011).

• A study involving 2,446 4th graders found no higher mathematics achievement for students working with the popular Odyssey Math software, which at the time was in use by 3 million students across the United States. However, during the course of the study,
students used the software on average only 38 minutes a week, well below the minimum of 60 minutes the program developers required; moreover, of 60 classrooms studied, students in only one classroom actually used the software for the full time period required (Wijekumar, Hitchcock, Turner, Lei, & Peck, 2009).

- A study of nearly 10,000 4th and 5th graders found that students whose teachers were trained in another popular program, Classroom Assessment for Student Learning, demonstrated no higher levels of achievement than control group students. Yet teachers spent, on average, only about half the recommended time in training (31 versus 60 hours) and, perhaps not coincidentally, demonstrated no observable changes in their teaching practices (Randel et al., 2011).

- A group of more than 600 5th graders who were taught for one year with Collaborative Strategic Reading, a scaffolded approach to reading instruction, demonstrated no better achievement than control group students; however, classroom observations revealed that only 21.6 percent of teachers used all five strategies that the approach comprises (Hitchcock, Dimino, Kurki, Wilkins, & Gersten, 2010).

Of the more than two dozen programs rigorously studied by the regional labs, only one was found to yield significant results, a program called Kindergarten PAVEd for Success. Interestingly, it also appeared to devote the most attention to implementation—using a differentiated coaching model that provided more intensive support for teachers struggling to apply the program’s explicit vocabulary instruction methods (Goodson, Wolf, Bell, Turner, & Finney, 2010).

**Applying the Science of Deliverology**

All of the above suggests that Michael Barber was spot-on with his focus on deliverology. Inconsistency in implementation confounds even the best laid plans. Bold proclamations and elaborate schemes don’t amount to a hill of beans if no one follows through on
them. Getting things done, according to Barber and his colleagues from McKinsey & Company (Barber et al., 2011), requires ensuring that all of these elements are in place:

- **Identifying a team or unit to focus on the implementation.** In keeping with the British adage that if everyone is responsible, no one is responsible, leaders must make clear who’s responsible for what and what they expect of everyone.

- **Maintaining clear performance targets and expectations.** In keeping with another adage—if you don’t know where you’re going you’ll probably wind up somewhere else—deliverology requires long-term goals and interim targets with progress indicators to track implementation (and celebrate accomplishments) along the way.

- **Creating new routines.** Any new program or approach requires creating new habits. One way to instill them is through regular progress monitoring and reporting, which sends the message to everyone that those pesky new expectations aren’t going away.

The early results in the United Kingdom bear witness to the importance of following principles of deliverology, especially when what needs to be done is fairly straightforward. And to be clear, there are a lot of fairly straightforward things that, done well, can significantly improve student success.

**The Power of Doing the Right Things Right**

In our previous books, we’ve identified many simple (though not necessarily easy) things that system leaders, school leaders, and teachers can do to move the needle on student performance, starting with nine key categories of effective instruction in *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012) and a broader set of teaching behaviors in *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching* (Goodwin & Hubbell, 2013), as well as three core elements of effective school leadership in *Balanced Leadership for Powerful Learning* (Goodwin, Cameron, & Hein, 2015), five key components of effective
school systems in *Simply Better* (Goodwin, 2011c), and six correlates of district leader success in *School District Leadership That Works* (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

We have seen schools and districts nationwide move the needle on student achievement when they get these things right, which led us to conclude as we did in *Simply Better*, “One of the most powerful things school systems can do to change the odds for all students is simply doing well what they already know they must do” (Goodwin, 2011c, p. 134). Put simply, big gains in student achievement come from doing the right things right. That’s why sometimes the most effective improvement efforts aren’t terribly flashy; they can be quite ordinary, even plain vanilla.

**Plain Vanilla Improvement**

In the summer of 1989, Sam Stringfield, a professor and researcher at Johns Hopkins University, stumbled onto a mystery. He and his colleague, Charles Teddlie, had been staring at a “mountain of data” gathered through the Louisiana School Effectiveness Study, an examination of eight pairs of matched schools of similar size and demographics in which one member of the pair had strikingly high performance and the other strikingly low performance. A team of observers had gone to all 16 elementary schools to gather qualitative data that the researchers hoped would tease out the disparities among the different sets of schools. No observers (many of whom were non-educators) were told which schools were doing well or poorly, yet they had all been able to separate the princes from the frogs. Stringfield spent the summer sifting through the observers’ case studies, trying to figure out what had tipped them off. After all, the low-performing schools weren’t obviously inadequate. Each had a star teacher or two, several programs in place, and other seemingly positive things going on in them. On the other hand, the top-performing schools were, to be frank, a little boring. Some were underfunded. None were implementing the latest reform du jour. As Stringfield
later recalled, “Several were as plain vanilla schools as could be imagined” (Stringfield, Reynolds, & Schaffer, 2010, p. 14).

There was, however, one striking difference between the two sets of schools that the observers seemed to have picked up on. In the low-performing schools, an “anything goes” attitude appeared to prevail; they tolerated a wide range of teacher and student behaviors. In contrast, the high-performing schools had a much clearer focus on student achievement and maintained much more consistent standards of teacher and student behavior.

The high-performing schools had routines and followed them. Observers could walk into different classrooms in these schools and see the same thing occurring—good teaching. Classrooms in the low-performing schools, on the other hand, were more like Forrest Gump’s box of chocolates: You never knew what you were going to get. As it turns out, the key to going from low performance to better performance often appears to be one word: consistency.

**Better Routines, Better Results**

All of that is easier said than done. Simply knowing what to do is not the same as doing it. The key is employing effective practices with quality, intensity, fidelity, and consistency—doing them so well in every school and classroom that they become routine (Goodwin et al., 2015). In our previous books, in fact, we’ve borrowed a page from surgeon Atul Gawande, whose *Checklist Manifesto* (2009) demonstrated the power of simple checklists in emergency rooms to help health professionals establish new routines and avoid critical oversights and mistakes. To help school leaders and teachers develop new routines and stay focused on doing what matters most, we’ve provided our own model checklists (which, we should note, we’ve always presented as “do-confirm” lists to help people stay focused on meaningful practices, rather than as less mindful “read-do” lists or lock-step procedures).
In struggling schools or those with low capacity, these new routines may need to come from outside the system—in the form of a new leader bringing new ways of doing things, an off-the-shelf curriculum, a new behavior management program, or a prescribed instructional framework. For example, a series of case studies of high-performing, high-poverty schools conducted by Karin Chenoweth (2007, 2009) of the Education Trust found that many had started on their pathway to improvement by adopting prepackaged curricula, such as America’s Choice, Success for All, or Core Knowledge—exactly which program they chose seemed to matter less than picking one and doing it well to overcome what one leader described as a “Burger King” culture in which teachers “got to have it their way” (Chenoweth, 2007, p. 128). In similar fashion, many of these turnaround schools gathered model lesson plans from teachers and put them in binders to give to novice teachers so they would have concrete examples of well-designed lessons to emulate. Soon after getting everyone on the same page, achievement rose.

**Hard Habits to Break**

It’s important to note that low-performing schools often fall into the pattern of unchallenged “habits” and dysfunctional ways of doing things that must be broken and replaced with new and better routines (Brinson & Rhim, 2009). Of course, breaking habits and establishing new routines is never quite as easy as it sounds. For starters, there’s the challenge of getting the new practice to stick. Charles Payne (2008) recounts, for example, the story of an urban high school where teachers came together to establish a new routine for reducing the excessively high number of students cutting class and loitering in the halls during class: Teachers with preparation periods would spent the first few minutes of those periods combing the hallways for students skipping class and send them all to the school’s auditorium where punishment (e.g., after-school detention) would be meted out.
The new routine worked. Within a few weeks, student absences from class dropped and a growing sense of order and safety began to take root in the school. But then one day, one teacher decided not to follow the routine; other teachers soon followed, the routine faded, and the school reverted to disorder.

A second, and often more difficult challenge, is that the new routines don’t always make things better—a phenomenon referred to as the “implementation dip” by Canadian researcher Michael Fullan (2001), who observed that when the fear of change collides with lack of know-how, performance slumps. To overcome implementation dips, Fullan encourages schools and their leaders to

- Maintain focus and urgency to quash any this-too-shall-pass syndrome.
- Monitor implementation to avoid backsliding into familiar (yet inferior) practices.
- Listen to naysayers and, as appropriate, incorporate their ideas into change efforts.
- Work as teams to buck each other up when the going gets tough.

By employing these strategies (as well as those Barber encourages for deliverology), school leaders can usually help their teams overcome implementation dips and experience success, which can feel like heady times. Data start trending upward, people start pulling together, and things feel different—a new culture begins to take root. People feel optimistic. They may begin to develop what's known as a sense of “collective efficacy”—a shared belief that they can pull together to have a positive effect on student success.

**Then the Pixie Dust Wears Off**

This upslope period may last a few years or more, but eventually, the pixie dust starts to wear off. The routines employed to address obvious shortcomings begin to reveal shortcomings of their own. Maybe
it becomes evident that the adopted reading program works great for 80 percent of students but not the other 20 percent. Or maybe the off-the-shelf curriculum that sparked initial gains by creating coherence and vertical articulation fails to engage students. Or the classroom walkthroughs that initially surfaced obvious opportunities for instructional improvement begin to feel rote and tedious, no longer uncovering straightforward ways to improve teaching. Or maybe the behavior management program that initially restored order and safety now begins to feel oppressive, focused more on creating compliance than building character.

When any of these things start to happen, the data begin to show it, too, as previous performance gains turn flat. It is precisely in these times that we realize we now face a new problem, one that, if we don’t know how to address it, can feel even more pernicious than implementation challenges or dips: the performance plateau.

The Dreaded Performance Plateau

Almost anywhere you look, performance plateaus abound in education. Here are a few examples:

- In Virginia, many so-called turnaround schools improved for three years, then hit a performance plateau (Hochbein, 2012).
- In Texas, test-based accountability drove performance gains for a while, then levelled off (Schneider, 2011).
- In 25 states, testing pressure created initial gains before student performance plateaued and declined (Nichols et al., 2012).
- Worldwide, education systems show a “pattern of a steep rise followed by a plateau,” likely because “once the ‘easy wins’ have been achieved in classroom instruction, further improvements take longer to embed and are harder to achieve” (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010, p. 50).

School systems are not alone. Plateau effects are common in other areas—from exercise to the arts to business (Sullivan &
Thompson, 2013). In exercise, the recommended treatment is to switch up one’s routine. In business, the treatment is much the same. Business coach Bill Bishop (2010) says that companies typically hit a performance plateau when they stop improving their products, believing they’ve found that one right way to do things. Similarly, Jim Collins (2009) has observed that one of the first signs of trouble among declining companies is that they lose “sight of the true underlying factors that created success in the first place” (p. 21). They come to believe they were successful “because we do these specific things” instead of understanding “why we do these specific things and under what conditions they would no longer work” (p. 21). In short, there’s a tendency to cling to the old routines that sparked initial success. Over time, though, those routines start to become mindless. People may still use them without fully understanding why they are doing them, when it’s time to change or improve upon them, or what they ought to do when the old routines no longer work.

When schools and districts hit performance plateaus, there’s a tendency to double-down on what they had been doing—tightening the screws, so to speak, to get everyone to follow the prescribed mathematics program to a T. Or having seen plug-and-play approaches work before, they try to patch the shortcomings of the original approach by plugging yet another new program into the gap.

The Trap of Technical Solutions

The trouble with these responses, though, is that they treat performance plateaus as what business researchers Ron Heifetz and Donald Laurie (1997) long ago referred to as technical problems—something for which there’s an existing solution; we just need to go out and find it and implement it well. However, performance plateaus tend to be much thornier and more complex, often because the obvious things have all been done so it becomes less clear where the solution lies—or what the deeper problem might be in the first place. Tackling this second breed of problem, which Heifetz and Laurie call
adaptive challenges, tends to require a different set of behaviors and tools, including collaboration, creativity, and experimentation—or, innovation.

We often encounter performance plateaus when we’ve exhausted all the obvious solutions or plug-and-play approaches: Better curriculum? Check. Ninety-minute reading blocks? Check. Professional development for teachers? Check. Behavior management program? Check. You can imagine the rest of the list. What this means is that performance plateaus themselves are often adaptive challenges. As a result, often the only way to push through them is to recognize that what created success in the past (e.g., plugging in externally developed solutions) won’t ensure continued performance gains in the future. What’s needed is a more adaptive and entrepreneurial spirit, which (as we’ll discuss in more depth later in this book) requires a different style of leadership—one that’s less directive and more empowering.

The Problem with Technocratic Fixes

More than a decade ago, when then U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige (2002) heralded the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, he wrote, quite insightfully, that “Never in the history of human civilization has a society attempted to educate all of its children.” In hindsight, his words may illuminate why the very reforms enacted by the landmark legislation missed the mark. Clearly, if no one in human history has figured out how to do what you’re setting out to do, there’s no blueprint or obvious solution set to get you there. It’s the equivalent of a moonshot—of President Kennedy declaring that Americans would land on the moon within the decade, even though it wasn’t clear at that moment exactly how we’d get there. Because the challenge was so immense, it was no coincidence that the Apollo mission begat a whole series of innovations—including computing, jet propulsion, Velcro, and dehydrated foods.

And yet, for a variety of reasons, including political expedience (Ravitch, 2010), we attempted to tackle the very complex challenge
of leaving no child behind like a technical problem, assuming that we could cobble together existing tools such as standards, assessments, and accountability to get us there. This disconnect between the aspirations and provisions of the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act seems, in retrospect, a little like trying to get to the moon with slide rules, combustion engines, and scuba gear.

Sure, setting high standards for learning (provided they are clear enough) can drive important changes to the curriculum, and accountability can focus attention on data and data-driven decision making to improve instruction. But when compared to the immense challenge of trying to help millions of students with different needs all achieve high levels of learning, standards, assessments, and accountability are limited tools.

So, it's not surprising, then, that reforms driven solely by high-stakes testing have had diminishing returns, resulting in the kinds of performance plateaus we’ve seen in the United States and elsewhere (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Fullan, 2011; Hopkins & Craig, 2011). What’s worse is that continued reliance solely on technocratic solutions was not only limiting but may have been counterproductive, as it only served to increase stress and anxiety, which in turn diminished people’s capacity for collaboration, experimentation, and innovation.

Higher Pressure, Lower Performance

Data suggest that our teachers and school leaders are under a tremendous amount of stress these days. In a recent MetLife Foundation (2013) study, for example, fully three-quarters of principals reported that their jobs—much of which now entail responding to external pressures—have become too complex. Nearly half (51 percent) of teachers and principals (48 percent) report being under great stress several days per week—a significant increase since 1985, when this data point was last measured.

The problem with this level of stress, as Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman (2013) note in their book Top Dog—a sweeping synthesis
of research on the relationship between pressure, competition, and performance—is that it’s not conducive to better performance. In many ways, the kind of stress many educators face right now seems to be tantamount to threat conditions, which prevent the kind of creative and collaborative thinking most needed to move beyond reliance on simple solutions and toward the sort of deeper analysis and inventive thinking necessary to tackle adaptive challenges.

**Learning to Unplug from Plug-and-Play**

In short, the real challenge of performance plateaus is learning to let go of the approaches we took to get early gains when they no longer work. Policymakers and leaders in the United States have been slow to recognize this reality and pivot to a different set of strategies. As a result, we keep relying on what Michael Fullan calls the “wrong drivers of reform” (2011). Smitten with the initial results of plug-and-play approaches, we keep hoping to push technical solutions from the top down, issuing policy from a central authority and expecting it to reach classrooms.

Indeed, the entire federal effort to employ scientific research to create a What Works Clearinghouse, well-intentioned though it may have been, reflects this kind of thinking. It assumed we could plug-and-play our way to best-in-the-world performance when, at best, off-the-shelf programs will only get us to a minimum threshold or acceptable baseline of performance. Going beyond that will require a different set of strategies.

Let’s be clear: Making this shift is never easy, especially when we’ve grown accustomed to using one set of leadership styles to achieve initial gains. Powering through implementation dips often requires some top-down direction—leaders must assign roles, monitor performance, and hold people accountable. Sure, they listen to concerns, but when confronting a technical problem, there’s little question about what needs to be done. Research suggests, in fact, that
these top-down or directive leadership styles can be effective when the solution is obvious or at hand (Goodwin, 2015b).

However, when schools face thornier challenges, a different approach is needed. It’s far more effective to drive improvement not from the top down but from the “inside out.” Thus, the first thing we may need to do when confronted with performance plateaus is acknowledge that the things that once worked for us—including a steely eyed focus on implementing off-the-shelf solutions—are likely to have diminishing returns.

**Adopt, Then Adapt**

Studies of schools that have managed to engage in continual improvement—that have been able to push through performance plateaus and sustain performance gains—show that they have learned to do exactly that: demonstrate a recurring pattern of *adopt, then adapt*. In her previously noted profiles of high-poverty, high-performing schools, Karin Chenoweth (2007, 2009) observed that many of these adopted pre-packaged curricula, such as America’s Choice, Success for All, Everyday Math, Open Court, and Core Knowledge, were used to spark initial gains. Yet over and over again, they pivoted to a different approach to sustain those gains. Often within a few years of *adopting* the curriculum, most schools saw it wasn’t a perfect fit for their students. Those that kept improving their performance began to *adapt* the off-the-shelf curriculum to align with their own student needs. Unlike businesses that lose their way, they weren’t wed to the specific approach that led to their early success; instead, they understood the principles underlying their success (e.g., having a strong, consistent, and aligned curriculum). And because they remained focused on their “customers” (i.e., student needs), they saw that the curriculum they had adopted was only a starting point and version 2.0 was now needed.
McREL’s own research on high-performing, high-poverty “beat-the-odds” schools (as reported in Goodwin, 2011c), which surveyed and compared the responses of hundreds of teachers in high- and low-performing, high-poverty schools found a similar pattern of empowerment. Teachers in beat-the-odds schools were more likely than teachers in low-performing schools to report having influence in school decisions and a shared vision for success. In short, they had learned to come together to develop new approaches and ways of working together to get things done. As schools improve, they’re likely to reach a performance ceiling where the way forward becomes less clear and more ambiguous. A school that has seen gains by enacting an external curriculum or reading program and ensuring greater consistency in learning experiences may now find itself facing a thornier challenge—perhaps motivating students to engage and buy into their own learning. When they reach this point, the way forward is less clear—the solutions are likely to lie in teams of teachers coming together to identify new ways to ignite students’ passion for learning, perhaps by unleashing their creativity and passions through immersive project-based learning. Basically, to tackle adaptive challenges, schools must adopt a different approach to leadership and improvement—one that drives change not from the top down, but from the inside out.

The Limited Half-Life of Top-Down Approaches

David Hopkins understood all of this as he sat in 10 Downing Street, trying to explain to the prime minister why the pixie dust of the United Kingdom’s heavy emphasis on literacy and mathematics had worn off. As he would tell the prime minister (and later write), top-down approaches can provide a “short, sharp shock” that jolts systems “out of complacency” and helps them focus on a few “measurable goals” (Hopkins, 2013, p. 9). For truly low-performing schools, urgency and focus are often exactly what’s needed. Thus, Barber’s focus on deliverology had been right at the time; it had compelled teachers across the United Kingdom to employ, with greater
consistency, better approaches to reading and mathematics instruction. And it had worked: Student achievement had improved.

Yet there was a problem baked into the overall approach. Although teachers were employing better teaching techniques, they had simply been following someone else’s paint-by-numbers program and hadn’t really gotten much smarter about teaching, improving their own knowledge or skills for teaching, or understanding what to do when the prescribed approaches stopped working under certain circumstances or with certain students.

That’s why top-down approaches, Hopkins observes, “have a very limited half-life” (2013, p. 9). Continued outside pressure becomes “oppressive, alienating, and counter-productive.” Once the pixie dust of technical solutions wears off, sustaining performance gains requires a different, “inside-out,” approach.

An Opportunity to Take a Different Approach in Australia

A few years after his tense conversation with Prime Minister Blair, Hopkins returned to academia, accepting a temporary teaching position halfway around the world at the prestigious University of Melbourne. As fate would have it, nearby, a newly minted regional director, Wayne Craig, found himself grappling with the question of how to help the Northern Metropolitan Region—a large, loose-knit school system serving more than 75,000 students, many of them immigrant students living in impoverished neighborhoods—overcome a long history of languishing for years as one of the worst performing regions in the state of Victoria.

Victoria: A Glimpse into Our Own Future?

Let’s pause here a moment because at this point, some readers, especially those in the United States, may wonder what they could possibly learn from Australia—a place that seems worlds apart and very different from the United States. In some regards, that’s true:
Many aspects of education in Victoria, Australia, are different (albeit in ways that can provide eye-opening insights for U.S. educators). In many ways, though, Victoria and its capital city of Melbourne reflect many of the same realities experienced by education systems across the United States and the rest of the world. Here are a few:

**It’s populous—and growing.** Victoria’s population recently passed the 6 million mark. If it were a U.S. state, it would be in a virtual tie with Missouri for the 18th most populous in the nation. Most of its residents are concentrated in the Melbourne metropolitan area, which has a population of close to 4.5 million people, which would make it the 12th largest U.S. city—close in size to Phoenix or San Francisco. And it’s been adding close to 100,000 residents each year (Martin, 2016), most of them arriving from outside Australia, bringing us to the next point.

**It’s diverse.** One quarter of Melbourne’s population was born overseas, hailing from 180 different countries and speaking more than 200 languages. Across most of the northern Melbourne metro area (where we focus our narrative), that proportion is closer to one-half.

**Its educators feel underpaid.** On paper, Australian teachers look slightly better paid than teachers in the United States, making $60,589 Australian dollars (or $44,000 U.S. dollars) per year, compared to $41,460 (U.S.) per year on average in the United States (Ricci, 2015). However, Melbourne is the sixth most expensive city in the world; a loaf of bread costs more than $4 and an average bottle of wine more than $23 (Calligeros, 2015). In fact, researchers speculate that a key reason that up to 50 percent of Victorian teachers leave the profession within their first five years is they simply feel underpaid and undervalued (McMillen, 2013).

**Its educators belong to unions.** The Victoria branch of the Australian Education Union represents 48,000 teachers, principals, and education support staff. Like unions in the United States, it provides professional learning services for educators, represents individual
educators in contractual disputes, and lobbies the state government for better salaries and working conditions for educators.

**Its students are tested—and results matter.** Student achievement is measured on a regular test called the National Assessment Programme for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). These results are partially used to guide decisions about principals’ employment. In addition, a high-school exit exam called the Victorian Certificate of Education serves as a high-stakes test for students, as scores on the test often determine their placement into university or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) school upon graduation.

Despite these many similarities with the U.S. context, there are some important differences:

**Schools operate mostly autonomously.** In the early 1990s, the entire state of Victoria adopted what was called “self-management,” giving school leaders control over hiring, budgeting, curriculum, and professional learning. While the state is divided into what are now four regions, regional offices are skeletal in size compared with central offices of large, urban school districts in the United States. Many schools band together in networks to pool resources for services like professional learning.

**Schools operate in a highly competitive environment.** In effect, Victoria has long had what amounts to a voucher program: Public, private, and parochial schools are publicly funded, and parents have the right to choose among them (though the tuition at private and, to a lesser extent, parochial schools often tends to exceed the government benefit). Thus, schools operate in something akin to a free market, competing for students and their associated enrollment dollars.

**Accountability is simple and direct.** As noted earlier, students are regularly tested in Australia. Results from these tests feed into a two-pronged system of accountability. First, the state of Victoria requires a regular school review—the equivalent of accreditation in the United States—during which third-party teams visit schools and
provide an analysis for school leaders and officials from the state. Generally, these reviews are formative in nature, yet for schools mired in low-performing status, they can contribute to a principal being recommended for “non-renewal” or termination. In short, principals in Australia face many of the same pressures as school leaders in the United States.

In many ways, then, Victoria reflects what could be the future of education in America, with every public school in effect operating as a school of choice, competing with parochial and private schools for student tuition dollars, and in some cases, their very survival. Right now, in fact, across the United States, many school districts (from Boston to Houston to Chicago to Denver) have moved to or are gravitating toward granting schools greater autonomy—not unlike what happened 20 years ago in Australia. Moreover, as of this writing, 31 states are considering creating or expanding school choice programs (Goldstein, 2017), and the U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has been a vocal supporter of vouchers and school choice. Thus, regardless of one’s view on the merits of such changes, peering into system-wide change in Melbourne may be instructive as it may provide a glimpse of the future of U.S. school systems.

Planning for Change in a Loosely Coupled System

In his more than 30 years as a principal and administrator, Wayne Craig had seen many reform efforts come and go. With great fanfare, someone atop the system would cook up a bright idea and attempt to foist it upon everyone else. Yet by the time the bright idea filtered down through layers of bureaucracy into school improvement plans and teacher behaviors, it often became so distorted, diluted, or lost in translation that nothing ever really changed. And that was before the move toward self-management in the 1990s had made the system even more “loosely coupled” and, thus, made the task of being an effective regional director imminently more complicated.
The last thing Craig wanted was for his tenure as regional director to be similarly futile. By chance, he bumped into Hopkins at a conference and learned that he had taken a position at the nearby university. Craig later picked up the phone and struck up a conversation with the Englishman. Before long, Hopkins found himself, at Craig’s request, touring the region’s schools to offer his own honest assessment of what was at the heart of their struggles, including the root causes of their endemic low performance.

After he toured the schools, Hopkins wrote back to Craig that the situation was indeed dire—student performance was low across most of the region and there were simply too many schools with too few students. Yet in his conversations with school staff, Hopkins had also caught a glimmer of hope, namely “a willingness to change and to face the challenges of school transformation” (Hopkins & Craig, 2011).

The challenge, as Hopkins saw it, would be to both address the urgent financial need to close schools (which would cause considerable disruption) while simultaneously engaging in much needed transformative school improvement efforts. The peril, of course, was that the hue and cry over school closures would distract from the more important effort to improve teaching and learning in the remaining schools. Yet, both needed to be done: Students couldn’t wait for the fuss over school closures to quiet down while they sat languishing in poorly performing schools.

After talking it over with Hopkins, Craig decided the best thing to do would be to redirect everyone’s attention to the real matter at hand: providing a high-quality education for all children regardless of their background. From the outset, it was clear that simultaneously shaking up and rebuilding a large school system would be an adaptive challenge; there was no set script or program to follow. Even if there were, Hopkins and Craig knew from experience it wouldn’t get them too far.
Sure, Craig could bring in some new reading or mathematics program and ride herd over public school principals to get them to monitor and enforce its implementation. He and his leadership team could also create a complex system of rewards and punishments to ensure teacher compliance with the program. Yet doing all of that would be akin to using a technical solution to solve an adaptive challenge, which they saw as one of the fundamental flaws with most complex reform efforts. Indeed, as they would later write together, “often we try to solve technical problems with adaptive processes, or, more commonly, force technical solutions onto adaptive problems” (Hopkins & Craig, 2011, p. 154).

No, what was needed was a different way of thinking about reform—not another prescribed approach, but one that could truly increase teachers’ professional capacity, inspiring and helping them to help one another develop better teaching practices that would aim to increase both student learning and motivation.

It was a simple idea: What if they started with teachers? What if they placed teachers and their motivation to change students’ lives at the center of the effort, reminding them why they became educators in the first place? Moreover, what if they started not with a glass-half-empty approach, wagging their fingers at what teachers were doing wrong, but rather with observing what the best teachers were doing right and systematically sharing those bright spots?

Better yet, what if they also started with students, learning what they liked and disliked about school? What if they asked students what would make them more excited about coming to school and what their teachers could do to make them more engaged and motivated as learners—in a word, curious?

That one idea, curiosity, was something that Craig couldn’t get out of his head. In the years he spent as a principal of a vocational school on Melbourne’s east side, transforming it from a school of last resort to a school of first choice for students from across the city (many of whom traveled three to four hours per day just to attend),
he had seen the power of students becoming passionate about and self-directing their learning. *Curiosity.* The word kept buzzing like a neon sign. What if *that* could become the focus of schooling?

**Balancing Outside In with Inside Out**

Conceptually, the two men were in agreement: Instead of simply trying to push ideas or directives from the top down, they would try to make them happen *from the inside out.* It wouldn’t be solely one approach or the other, of course. They knew, after all, that sometimes a leader must lead. Sometimes new habits need to be adopted and new routines put into place. Yet as Hopkins observed to Blair that day in 10 Downing Street and in a subsequent book, *Every School a Great School* (2007), the key to sustaining system reform over the long haul is to continually rebalance “top-down and bottom-up” change.

That would need to be the case in the Northern Metropolitan Region. Some of the worst-performing schools would likely require a healthy dose of top-down direction to establish order. Others, though, would need to push through performance plateaus by rethinking how they went about their business, starting perhaps with placing student curiosity at the center of their efforts. Ultimately, even struggling schools, once they had established some order and consistency in their practices, would need to make the transition to “inside-out” approaches as well. Helping leaders make this pivot—especially those who had found success with top-down directivity—would not be easy, of course.

**PAUSE AND REFLECT**

- What habits are ingrained in your school or district? Are they productive or unproductive?
- In what areas might you be experiencing an implementation dip?
• In what areas might you be experiencing a performance plateau?
• Do you need more consistent and effective routines (technical solutions)?
• Do you need to adapt what you’ve adopted (adaptive challenges)?

ENVISION A BETTER WAY

Inside-out approaches are, by definition, local and individualized with no lockstep program to follow. Nonetheless, it can be helpful to imagine new paths forward. With each chapter, we’ll suggest a few roads less traveled to help you and your colleagues envision inside-out change in your schools.

• Reanalyze trend data for implementation dips and performance plateaus.
• Inventory your organizational routines and categorize them as productive or unproductive.
• Create three lists: (1) keep doing, (2) do more consistently, and (3) stop doing.
• Reassess your improvement plan(s) to identify which strategies are technical solutions and which are more complex adaptive challenges.

Sailing into Uncharted Waters

From the outset of their efforts in Melbourne, Craig and Hopkins were in agreement that, conceptually, leading a reform effort that sought to engender change from the bottom up by empowering educators to build their professional capacity made a lot of sense. Yet they understood that they were sailing into relatively uncharted waters.

What they were attempting to do—place student curiosity and teachers’ intrinsic desire to change students’ lives at the center of an
improvement effort—was a radical idea, nothing short of a complete paradigm shift when it came to education reform. Focusing on curiosity? Encouraging teachers instead of browbeating them? Reforming from the inside out? It seemed crazy, but also made a whole lot of sense.

But could it really work? Could they really pull it off?
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**About McREL**

McREL International is an internationally recognized nonprofit education research and development organization, headquartered in Denver, Colorado, with offices in Honolulu, Hawai’i; Nashville, Tennessee; Charleston, West Virginia; and Melbourne, Australia. Since 1966, McREL has helped translate research and professional wisdom about what works in education into practical guidance for educators. Our 120-plus staff members and affiliates include respected researchers, experienced consultants, and published writers who provide educators with research-based guidance, consultation, and