

INTRODUCTION

FINDING NEW WAYS TO THINK ABOUT OLD PROBLEMS



By focusing my attention on the solution to the problem rather than the problem, I was able to quickly turn what seemed like a major crisis into an opportunity.

—Les Brown (2007)

Ghosts of Underperformance



Although there are varying theories regarding the purpose of schools as institutions within American culture, evidenced by the myriad of school vision and mission statements that exist today, most agree that schools are designed for three key reasons. First, schools are expected to create a knowledgeable and skilled workforce that can productively contribute to our dynamic society. This means that schools have a universal economic function to provide people with the skills and abilities to be employable and to contribute to the goods and services needed to sustain our communities. Second, schools are supposed to focus on the global implications of the society in which we live, including each individual's growth, both academically and morally, so that we can comprehend and achieve new ways of living that are both comfortable and sustainable. Third, schools exist to help people as they grow and mature to realize their full potential. Education and learning, when done well, should honor individuals and support them to grow into the best version of their true selves.

Each sentiment is forged in the notion that school is designed for the preparation one needs to live making their own contributions to the greater world outside of education. While one aspect of the equation is about jobs, another is focused on humanity itself, and the last, maybe most important, is about self-awareness and being fulfilled. Nonetheless, these beliefs about schooling demonstrate a desire for schools to develop and strengthen every student's capacity as a human. There are all kinds of other arguments to be made about the purpose of school, *and* the underlying concept is that school should prepare young people for their futures, and many of the current metrics used for school accountability have identified that schools are not succeeding as they were intended.

In fact, for almost three quarters of a century, the American education system has been criticized as underperforming. In 1958 *Life* magazine contrasted a student from Chicago to his Soviet counterpart. This led to a major reform of schools in the United States. However, schools left serious problems untouched and the status of schools in the United States compared to other countries declined. Arne Duncan, a former Secretary of Education and veteran of the Chicago public school system, started the first sentence in his 2019 book, *How Schools Work: An Inside Account of Failure and Success from One of the Nation's Longest-Serving Secretaries of Education* with, "Education runs on lies." The widespread belief that the American education system is not working is not a new phenomenon.

We don't believe that this general attitude is a condemnation of educators but rather a hard look at the system itself. Certainly, there remains faith that schools can and will improve despite the growing number who believe the public school system is beyond repair. Too many schools are haunted year-in and year-out with the same obstacles and challenges that they seemingly can't overcome or, quite frankly, that they have accepted as reality. Determined leaders use their best skills to turn schools around, one complex problem at a time. From literacy scores to student discipline, from teacher

retention to dropout rates, from poverty to lack of funding, there are countless issues that schools in the United States contend with every day.

Schools are a microcosm that uniquely display all of society's problems and yet their leaders are put in a position to solve them when no other federal, state, or local agency has been able to do so. Just let that validation soak in for a moment. It's about the most unfair expectation that has been heaped upon any single public enterprise, and as school leaders we are at the head of it. As lifelong educators, committed to students and staff, this is the challenging reality that shakes us to our core. The ghosts of underperformance continue to haunt our educational institution today and will do so for the foreseeable future. That is, unless we think about these issues with a mindset that has never been used before.

Perennial Problems in Education

Consider common perpetual issues within education—crises such as numeracy, equity, grading, reading ability, and teacher retention—that are continually managed but not solved for future sustainability. A prime example is student apathy. Once this attitude evolves into disruptive behavior, tardiness, and absenteeism, it can have disastrous consequences as a gateway for student dropout. Many schools are managing this well, on a daily basis, but we're a long way from a long-term resolution across every system.

The challenge that we face is that many of our interventions and meaningful approaches are one-sided, with most of the work being done by the school staff alone. Unfortunately, because these problems are so complex in nature, and, in the case of apathy—the student possibly unwilling, unable, or even unavailable to be included in the solution—the responsibility defaults to the school and not necessarily anyone or anything else that should be factored into a meaningful change.

This means that more phone calls, more meetings, and, frankly, more consequences rarely work, impacting more greatly a marginalized population of students as it stands. This is the type of problem that needs to be approached and solved through a different mindset, what we call a *crisis mindset*. Our central argument in this book is that the perennial problems that persist in education will never truly change unless we approach them as we would an in-the-moment crisis. If there was a fire in the dumpster behind the school, we wouldn't schedule a meeting about it or form a committee. We would be all hands on deck, including the local first responders, to put the fire out. Then, we would investigate the reason for the fire to put systems in place so that it won't happen again. That's not how we currently treat student apathy, reading scores, absenteeism, and other chronic issues. But it should be.

Chronic Conditions for Failure

Many of the attempts to solve these deeply ingrained problems aren't actual solutions at all but rather efforts for coping with the problems in the best way we know how. The multitude of strategies that have been used to improve third-grade reading scores, for example, are as effective as a fork in a sugar bowl. Mindshifts are necessary, ones that seek to identify and treat every aspect of a problem. Our sugar bowl needs a shovel.

Most attempts at solving major problems in education are limited by two chronic conditions for failure: One, they are transactional by design; and two, they fail to recruit and extend solutions beyond the walls of the school. Let's take a closer look at our literacy example. We know that it's a key determiner of student success in school and life (Ritchie & Bates, 2013). Yet, many students continue to read below grade level even when literacy is the focus of every teacher and support staff. Why haven't our school improvement plans been effective?

THE TRANSACTION

To improve lifelong literacy, many schools will purchase a viable program and recruit a dynamic teacher to lead the charge. This approach is transactional. The identified problem is a lack of rigorous reading, and the treatment is a new reading program. Let's assume that this process works—done well and implemented coherently (Fullan & Quinn, 2016)—the reading program has the potential to improve reading scores for students who lack proficiency within that single school. The chronic condition is not a lack of effort from the school, but, rather, the scalability of the solution and its sustainability within the system.

In this case, the improved reading scores are a confined victory, dependent upon leadership, resources, and talent that are unique to the school. The response is reactionary and only addresses the problem in one specific school. This type of solution does nothing to address the causes for inadequate reading scores, and therefore, only acts on *effects* of a systemic issue but doesn't combat the *root causes* to prevent it from recurring within future populations of students. [Figure I.1](#) shows how the root causes are unseen and do not have easy access. The effects, in this image the leaves, are more visible and can be reached with less effort. Using this analogy, it's understandable that when schools are awarded grants to tend to the leaves of the problem—analyze data, buy new programs, develop staff skills—they find that when the grant money runs out, the problem remains or recurs. The deeply rooted problems in education require permanent solutions to completely abolish the undesired outcomes.

This typical response to a symptom, in [Figure I.1](#) the leaves, such as expecting a reading program to solve low achievement, accommodates the real problem within that school. But it neglects to address literacy issues systematically. Chances are, the problem does not originate within the school—therefore, it cannot be solved there. One might contend that third-grade reading scores are primarily a result of reading deficiencies that stem from the time when the child was

1.1 Root Causes and Effects

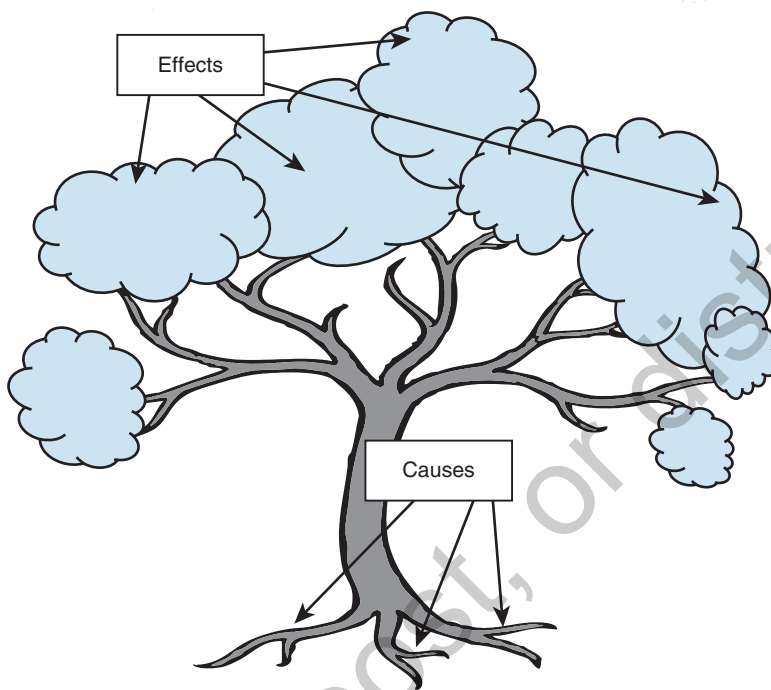


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younger than five. In that case, the foundational issue is not the scores, but rather circumstances outside the realm of K-12. Only by diagnosing the true problem can leaders then take actions for abolishing the problem. However, if the root cause is found to be lack of exposure to complex texts once students learn the fundamentals of reading, strategies to increase time that children are engaged with challenging texts can be explored.

Einstein is reported to have said that if he only had one hour to solve a problem he would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and five minutes on the solution. With this in mind, jumping to a conclusion that teachers need training on a new literacy program will not address the root cause of lack of exposure to texts be it prekindergarten or during school. It's a mismatch. The strategy does not align with the problem. It's

effectively the same as changing your oil because you have a flat tire. This awareness of problem-solution alignment is precisely the type of clarity we offer.

Educators are better positioned to create systemic solutions when underlying issues are laid bare. We'll say more about this in Chapter 5. Nonetheless, we don't want to minimize school-based successes; school leaders should attack their individual problems as best they can. There is no doubt that real wins occur under herculean efforts, but wouldn't systemic responses be preferable so that the herculean efforts aren't necessary? Reactionary thinking is exhausting and will never stem the tide of a problem that has its origin elsewhere. Instead, we advocate for mindshifts that aim to uproot problems at their origin once and for all.

THE NEED FOR A NETWORK

This leads us to the crux of the second chronic condition for failure, which is trying to solve the problem solely within the walls of the school. The problems that are haunting schools year-in and year-out are also plaguing communities across the country. Anywhere we find poverty, we also find internet connectivity issues. Schools can't solve these problems alone. A network of support composed of the school and outside supporting agencies is needed for lasting and sustainable change. With a shared responsibility between the community and the school, each party bears the role of problem-solver and can embrace problems rather than pawn them off. Pairing resources accomplishes things that could never be achieved alone.

There are situations when the school and community agencies are restricted because they are governmentally controlled. Yes, policies, legislation, and funding are critical, but it is also important to note that solutions do not live solely within the walls of the legislative hall. Community organizations, from businesses to after-school programs, need to work in unison, and mutually accept these challenges as everyone's responsibility with joint accountability for the solutions. This does not take the burden from the school and place it elsewhere. In

fact, the school leader might act as the primary influencer. It just signifies a change in mindset that the chronic conditions for failure are perpetuated by the one-to-one transactions that individual schools believe will allow them to solve problems that, in actuality, are far beyond what school reform could possibly accomplish. Perennial issues in education, our Ghosts of Underperformance, won't be solved if both of the chronic conditions for failure aren't reworked. We advocate for a new way of thinking.

A Network of Support

If we genuinely want to help schools succeed, then communities as a whole must abandon the typical finger-pointing approach to problem-solving and embrace the truth that innovation and genius are discovered when we are willing to be vulnerable, when we admit to our shortcomings, and when we partner with others to solve our problems (Brown, 2015). We currently only see this phenomenon—vulnerability, acceptance, and partnership—when a community is facing a crisis.

The care that many people receive from community members when diagnosed with an illness is an example that comes to mind. An individual receives expert attention from doctors and may even require extended care in a hospital. But the hospital team doesn't come over and cut the patient's grass or feed the patient's dog—friends and neighbors do that work. If the person doesn't have someone to watch the children, family members take over, not the hospital. It's not the nurse who drops off the pan of lasagna; it's a concerned coworker. The ideal community provides a complete network of support, and the network doesn't come together just to help with the illness. Everyone realizes that there are peripheral needs in addition to medical treatment, and each person or entity plays their necessary role.

When friends and family aren't available, we've also witnessed what happens. Things fall apart. All those needs don't go away, and they become severe issues that, when unresolved over time, become very complicated to reverse. The doctors and hospitals aren't able to solve all of these problems for their patients. They may have contacts and resources for the patient, but their primary purpose is to treat the patient's illness.

In contrast, think about what happens in schools. As community resources become scarce, schools have evolved into doing far more than just educating students, offering services that are generally well beyond the scope of the school's purpose. This is specifically where the community network is needed. Schools aren't balking or rejecting these new and growing demands, but they do require that the neighbor come over to cut the grass or that someone help out after hours to make sure everything is in working order. This is mostly so that the schools can focus on the job of educating children. This give-and-take relationship also works in reverse when schools serve as supporters for the community. School facilities can be used for community education and youth athletics or hosting a food drive for the local food pantry. The point is, during times of crisis, we develop networks of support—that's exactly what is needed in schools. We need to see these perennial problems as the crises they are and apply the mindshifts to address them.

Opportunity From Crisis

The word "crisis" immediately elicits an emotional response. However, if we trace the word "crisis" back to its Latin and Greek roots, we find that it refers to a turning point. The turning point occurs because of the response to a crisis, which is where we find an intensified level of human thinking and action. The collaboration, commitment, strength, innovation, and focus are unparalleled. We are not referring to the primal reactions that many people have during a crisis that cloud

judgment, cause panic, and limit resourceful thinking. We are delving into the minds of the people who somehow find clarity and rise to provide needed leadership in a crisis. This type of crisis-thinking is attributed to leaders of our past, like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. but also business leaders of the present, like Patrick Doyle, who we feature later in Chapter 7.

To understand this type of thinking better, we must first determine what constitutes a crisis. As humans, we respond to situations and events in a variety of ways. Typically, we hope that our reaction is equal to the severity of the circumstances at hand. Not everything is a crisis, and we're not saying that leaders should use a crisis mindset at all times, quite the contrary. Some problems are small and easily managed, while others have the potential to be completely disruptive. Some issues affect a small number of people while others can alter entire communities and countries forever. The size of the problem, the magnitude of the disruption, and how many people are impacted are not what make for a crisis.

Even the severity of the problem alone doesn't qualify it to be a crisis. The problem itself is only one side of the equation, and the other side is whether or not there are resources in place or enough people who are capable and available to deal with the circumstances. It's at this intersection—available resources and human capacity to handle the problem—where we find ourselves in crisis. In other words, a crisis is an event that, left to its natural progression, is unmanageable. Without a new way of thinking and a new level of support, a crisis will continue to devastate everyone in its path.

Lessons Learned From the Pandemic

One thing that we've learned from various crises in history, and most recently COVID-19 in 2020, is that humans will move

mountains to find short-term solutions that can have implications for long-term sustainability. When events threaten to crumble the foundation on which we live, we respond to preserve and protect our well-being and ultimately our survival. During COVID-19, we have seen incredible reactions and changes made in record time to respond to life-threatening scenarios. We've seen alliances made, locally and nationally, for the betterment of humanity. We've witnessed amazing creativity and accelerated innovation.

These changes speak to healthcare facilities, small business, restaurant owners, and more. Particularly within education, we've seen transformation in processes and teaching strategies that literally shifted within days and sometimes hours. It's true that some of these changes were on the horizon anyway, while changes might not have happened for decades. The pandemic taught us that we have the capacity to tackle our most intractable issues. But this was only possible with the kind of determination and mental shift that we don't usually manifest on a daily basis.

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