
Preface

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT AND WHO SHOULD READ IT

This book is a response to one of the front-page items in every newspaper today, the looming crisis in our nation's schools and the suggested remedy for the crisis, state-mandated and distally developed tests: tests designed far away from the teachers and children they measure. Written tests are just one form of the many measures or assessments that play an important part in the learning-teaching process. Imagined as the only way to ensure success and uniformity in an increasingly diverging and world-dependent society, the tests have become a hurdle for students, parents, teachers, and schools to overcome. Fortunately, human beings are blessed with the ability to overcome hurdles; usually, the process of overcoming them makes us stronger and wiser.

Geographical obstacles to distant but promising resources have been overcome with human ingenuity and energy by building bridges. Bridges have useful functions, but, additionally, they are, in themselves, often objects of beauty. This book offers suggestions for building a bridge to overcome the testing hurdle and, perhaps, in the process, building a better educational structure of function and beauty.

Every bridge has a crossover goal and a starting and ending place. My crossover goal is to bring understanding, coping skills, and possible value to the current headlong thrust into an educational culture governed by mandated tests. My bridge will offer neither outright condemnation nor unconditional support for this trend but will accept the tests as reality, a reality that educators have to contend with as part of the terrain. The trend is an obstacle that, perhaps, can be overcome with new and better connections between what educators believe is best and what they do for children, parents, and society—and how society measures and supports what they do.

The broader problem analyses and suggestions for resolution presented are intended for all the related decision makers, including the politicians and government officials who mandate that tests must be given, as the only solution to our nation's problem of underachieving groups of students. The specifics of the remedies may prove most useful for those who wish to confront them in the most productive way—our teachers and curriculum leaders.

AN OUTLINE OF THE BRIDGE-BUILDING STEPS

My starting place in Chapter 1 begins, like the bridge engineer, with an attempt to define the problem. A broad view of the terrain is a good place to begin. Understanding and knowledge of history, as we will see ahead, is an important variable in affecting school change. It places the present in context and avoids repeating actions that have previously had negative results. It provides a baseline for recognizing critical changes that must be dealt with. Sometimes, it may also offer suggestions that have been successful in the past. Chapter 2 hones in on the more current setting, the existing framework and current specifics of the problem, and then it reviews and evaluates a sample of already tried or proposed resolutions for improving schools. The purpose of this is to learn and gather the very best materials and actions, make any needed minor adjustments to those that have promise, and discard the hopeless ones.

Following the diagnosis of obstacles to overcome, Chapter 3 reviews the clustered variables of history, vision, ownership, capacity, leadership, and time, which are embedded in the process of changing schools and must be reckoned with. Having already begun to address the variables of history and vision in previous chapters, I will suggest some of the first steps in building capacity, generating ownership, and providing leadership and time. Each of these is then pursued in greater depth in the following chapters.

One advantage for the bridge builder is the availability of local materials. If there is good local sand for concrete, use it. Chapter 4 will present my overall vision of how distally produced tests, generated far from the students they measure, can fit into the overall role of assessment as a guide to instruction. It will suggest how schools and teachers can build their capacity to use high-stakes, standards-based tests, in conjunction with their own proximal classroom or locally developed measures, as a guideline for making needed changes in curriculum and instructional practices. There will be specific suggestions for how educators can use rubrics and the disaggregated analyses of their own and distal tests to identify areas of greatest need. Disaggregation can also be helpful in identifying affecting variables such as socioeconomic status and gender, as well as environmental variables such as class size and

teachers' attitudes. Knowing what these variables are can help us focus our energies so that they will have the maximum effect.

Chapter 5 will outline a process for building consensus on the specifics of the school's curriculum, as well as its relationship to diagnosed needs. It presents two alternative design processes, beginning either with the mandated tests or with the curriculum standards upon which the tests are based. Engagement of teachers in the process of designing need-responsive curriculum can bring them a sense of order and purpose that may serve to ease their existing anxiety and build ownership.

Chapters 6 and 7 lead to the ending place for my bridge: better schools. Just as the engineer depends on a crew of competent builders, the success of our schools and our children depends on good teaching, parenting, and leadership. It also depends on having children ready to learn. Chapter 6 presents a model for recruiting teachers, building their capacity, and nurturing them through the tough beginning years. The model is based on an analysis of our urgent need for capable teachers, and it offers specific suggestions for meeting the need for both new and newly capable incumbent teachers.

Chapter 7 addresses the role of leadership in bringing it all together and facilitating successful access to the other side. The critical component of power and its manifestation in the actions of pressure and support are addressed and compared in different educational leadership roles. Alternative models of leadership are presented that address the need for cohesion and the complications and advantages of sharing responsibilities.

SOME IMPORTANT HELPERS

While trying to crystallize concepts from my own prior experience in order to conjoin them with the thinking and actions of others and place them in the current situational context—a constructivist activity—I reflected on the impact of so many others in framing this experience. I need to begin (as I will ahead) with my own teachers, one of whom was particularly inspiring in getting me to think about the school change process and who encouraged me to write. Ann Lieberman is busy inspiring many others, as well, and I am most grateful that she found the time to write a foreword for this book. I then need to thank my many colleagues in the Pearl River, New York, school district with whom I spent 23 years as a teacher and administrator, and who provided many of the examples I used to illustrate my ideas.

Dr. Margaret Fitzpatrick, President of St. Thomas Aquinas College, where I have spent almost 11 years, has been a consistent and enthusiastic supporter of the Marie Curie Math and Science Center and its far-reaching endeavors. She has also conveyed the level of personal confidence in my

enterprises that one needs to plunge ahead. My colleagues throughout the college have been similarly supportive, as have the teachers and administrators in the East Ramapo, New York, schools with whom I am presently working so closely. Most of all, I wish to thank my many students, ranging from the 9- and 10-year-olds who sat in my class over 50 years ago to the over-50 career changer who was there this past semester.

There are also individuals in my personal life who deserve recognition. My friends and walking partners, Diana Siegel and Hilda Epner, both teachers, listen to my ideas as we walk, and they respond from their own considerable experience. Hilda is also the artist responsible for the drawings of the frontispiece and epilogue. Keeping me well informed of the vocabulary, values, and actions of the newest generation of learners as we drive home from school each day are my two grandsons, Joseph and Edward Burke, and their car pool companions. My husband, Mel, is always there to support my endeavors and share the time they require. The staff of Corwin Press, and, especially, Executive Editor, Faye Zucker, continue to be wonderful to work with, and I appreciate their confidence, patience, and expertise. It is always rewarding for authors to have someone read their work with a careful, meaningful, and responsive eye. Copy editor Hawley Roddick and production editor Olivia Weber not only did this but also read with such great precision and knowledge that there is no doubt in my mind that this is a far, far better work as a result of their efforts. We all should be grateful for their dedication to a task so well done.