Preface

You are reading this book because you care about schools. You share my concern, and that of many others, that an unacceptable number of schools in America are not living up to their potential. You believe good schools can be great ones and low-performing schools can also become great. In this book, I discuss why and how they can change.

Concern about American schools has been a constant theme throughout our history, and it continues in the twenty-first century. Critics and reformers have a litany of complaints.

National attention has focused on the "achievement gap" between White students and students of color, between middle-class students and those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, between students who have special needs or who are English language learners and those who are not. But not enough has been done to address this inequity.

Many schools in poor urban areas lack certified and trained teachers, textbooks, computers, and facility upgrades needed to provide a quality education. Some observers, like Jonathan Kozol (2005), argue that, as a result, school segregation is now worse than ever.

The emphasis on increasing reading, writing, and math scores has, in many cases, led to regimentation and a sole focus on raising test results. Critic Alfie Kohn (1999) argued that schools need to encourage students to think widely and deeply, not to memorize facts but instead to explore ideas and challenge assumptions. Psychologist Robert Sternberg (2006) calls creativity a habit and is disturbed that because of conventional standardized tests, which have only one "right answer," schools today are treating creativity like a *bad* habit.

Other educational reformers contend that important educational goals, such as the need to develop students who can think critically, problem solve, and work in teams, have been tossed aside. Furthermore, in some schools, foreign language, physical and health education, art, and music have virtually disappeared. Character education has been forgotten.

Despite a technological revolution and widely spreading globalization, American high schools are described as remarkably similar to what they were

nearly a century ago. The December 2006 issue of *Time* magazine calls for bringing U.S. schools out of the twentieth century, noting that "American schools aren't exactly frozen in time, but considering the pace of change in other areas of life, U.S. public schools tend to feel like throwbacks"(Wallis, Steptoe, & Miranda, 2006, ¶ 2). American students must have twenty-first-century skills. They need to have good people skills, become global trade literate and "out-of the-box" thinkers. In an age of unlimited and overwhelming information access, students need to "rapidly process what's coming at them and distinguish what's reliable and what isn't . . . Students must know how to manage, interpret, validate, and use the overflowing information coming their way" (Wallis et al., 2006, ¶ 8).

Nonetheless, there is good news. The same *Time* magazine article quoted above gives examples of schools that require fluency in a second language, college-level research papers, and real-world service projects; schools that combine core knowledge with making connections across academic disciplines; schools that choose depth over breadth and have students discuss challenging topics, such as "the elusive nature of truth."

Some major urban school districts, such as Atlanta and Boston, have seen dramatic increases in student achievement. In Atlanta, between 1999 and 2005, the number of fourth-graders who met or exceeded English and math standard scores increased from 47% to 83% and 43% to 79%, respectively (Panasonic Foundation, 2006). According to an analysis conducted by an advocacy group and independent researchers, a pilot network of sixteen autonomous schools, collaboratively designed by the Boston school district and the teachers union, were "paying off in higher test scores, attendance, and college-going rates" (Manzo, 2006, p. 9).

Education Week, in nearly every issue, focuses on an education victory, such as an innovative after-school program, a successful community outreach project, a powerful business/school district partnership, a set of nontraditional strategies used for school improvement. For example, the San Francisco school district emphasizes assistance for low-performing schools, rather than mandating particular teaching models or conducting wholesale school restructuring. The goal is to remove barriers to good instruction by providing full-time substitute teachers, more teacher planning time, experts to provide feedback on lessons, and a master teacher to lead schoolwide training (Archer, 2006, p. 36).

The small learning community concept, although difficult to implement, has produced numerous small schools, characterized by more individual attention for students; staff growth; and thematic, interdisciplinary teaching. There are innovative schools where teachers are treated as professionals and collaboration has replaced isolation; schools where creative classes become the norm; schools where the teachers go to summer school to learn how their teaching can correlate with the demands of technology, scientific research, or financial companies.

This book does not disparage or dismiss these important examples of school improvement and innovation, but it does question why these examples are the exception rather than the rule.

Schools That Change asks us to consider how some schools, that were once disappointments and failures, were able to become exemplary. We will look at what these schools were; what they became; and, most important, *how* they made significant change. What I call "lessons to be learned" are included throughout this book. These are lessons drawn from harsh realities. However, these are also lessons that generate hope and demonstrate how we can bring schools seen as dismal to schools that serve our children and adolescents in meaningful ways.

Dramatic school improvement—significant school change—is challenging, but, as this book details, it can be done. It has been done, and, you as an educator, student, parent, community activist, researcher, advocate, concerned citizen, or policymaker can help create many more school success stories. Your commitment to the children and adolescents, who attend PreK–12 schools, requires you to be a dreamer, a realist, a leader, and an agent of change.

Change involves a journey, filled with promise and perils. This book presents portraits of eight schools that took that journey and in doing so experienced poor travel conditions, accidents, missed landmarks, and maps filled with errors. Sometimes, they had to change drivers or rest along the way. Sometimes, they got lost and doubted they would complete their trip. Nonetheless, they continued and finally reached their destination, transforming schools that desperately needed to be changed.

More schools can successfully navigate a similar journey, and it is my hope this book will help. *Schools That Change* is organized into six parts. The first part is called "The Dynamics of Change," and it reflects what we have experienced as individuals who initiate and feel the impact of change. The ideas and concepts, the definitions and terms, will be familiar to you. Often, you will shake your head in agreement because you can relate to the examples and anecdotes.

Parts II and III tell wonderful stories of elementary and secondary schools. They present portraits of eight schools that turned the dynamics of change in their favor. These are schools that took on the challenge of change—and won. These are schools that serve as exemplars.

Similar to the schools described in this book, the particular school *you* care about is at a different place all its own. It is idiosyncratic. It has its own history and players, its own circumstances and conditions. In reading this part of the book, you may find a school that seems a lot like a school you attended, worked in, or studied. Make the comparison and learn from that story. But don't stay there; the other school portraits also have important lessons to teach.

This part of the book provides data and documentation. It depicts what happened in real schools; it does not use hypothetical case studies. You will meet dynamic characters and dramatic plots. Certainly, you may read as many of these portraits as you wish. I urge you to read all of them so you can identify the common themes.

My research has suggested common variables, which are pieced together in a conceptual framework. See if you agree with my interpretation. In Part IV, I explain what I term *essential elements*, and in Part V I talk about *catalytic variables*. Although these sections are free standing, they flow from the portraits. Finally, in Part VI, I synthesize the lessons and present traps to avoid.

As you read, ask yourself whether the conceptual framework and lessons make any sense. Can you use them—and in what ways? Can you relate—and why does that matter? Can you look at schools in different ways, for what they are and what they could be? Can you unleash the energy that is within yourself and others? Can you make a difference?

Answers are important, but questions are more important. John Dewey wanted us to relate learning experiences to the real world, to learn by doing, to construct our knowledge. But even more critically, he wanted us to reflect on what we were learning and doing. He wanted us to see the world anew.