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Introduction

by *Derek Mitchell*

A book about the power of public school teachers and leaders using improvement science to bring about educational equity needs to begin with gratitude.

- If you are a teacher providing excellent instruction, optimism, and love to your students as you fight the tremendous headwinds of the three pandemics—COVID-19, poverty, and racism—thank you.
- If you are a leader striving to meet the needs of students and their families in some of our country’s most challenged communities, thank you.
- If you are a district leader buffeted by insufficient investment and heightened expectations on our nation’s public schools while trying to manage politics, deliver high-quality support to schools, and sustain your team members, thank you.
- If you are a community member trying to improve schools by tirelessly attending school board meetings and bringing the truth of your lived experience to those often-charged discussions, thank you.
- If you are a parent with concerns about your neighborhood school—but you enroll your child there anyway because you believe in public education—and fight to make the school better, thank you.

This book is a love letter to all of you, to show you that you are seen, your efforts are valued, and your voices are being heard. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new appreciation of the critical role that our public schools play in all aspects of our society’s health and well-being. Many who didn’t see it before now understand the important role that our public schools play in shoring up our democracy. At the same time, we are also clear that our public schools have not yet lived up to their tremendous promise.

There are many reasons for this, the biggest being that society keeps moving the goalposts for what we expect from our educators. We ask a great deal from you—now more than anyone ever imagined with COVID-19 still roiling after nearly three years. We look to schools to solve what we often lack the will to properly face in other venues. And we consistently underresource public schools, asking those who work in and around them to take up the slack the best they can. Implementing desegregation efforts, fighting poverty, supporting Americans with disabilities, helping English language learners, fighting gang violence, preventing teen pregnancy, integrating technology, embracing LGBTQIA+ students, and, most recently, accommodating various public health strategies and beliefs during a global pandemic—the list goes on and on. Each of these efforts in the last 80 years to make public schools, and therefore our society, more welcoming and inclusive has required new knowledge, new skills, and new resources for those who work in our schools.

Yet we have never afforded schools sufficient time to master each new expectation before we pile on the next. It is an endless cycle. New, higher expectations are followed by a shortage of resources needed to meet them, leading to a general failure of schools to meet those expectations, followed by blame and castigation.

Just because our public schools are our country's best strategy for producing the healthy, vibrant, and egalitarian democratic society that most of us envision—a lively, loving, learning environment in every single neighborhood in our country—does not mean that schools are the reason for our inability to achieve that ambition.

The never-ending loop of expectations and blame is a trap for teachers and leaders in our most challenged schools. Those of us who have spent decades working in schools know that it doesn't have to be this way. Our work at Partners in School Innovation during the past 30 years proves it.

Partners was founded in 1993 to support Bay Area public schools serving predominantly poor students of color and English language learners in their efforts to achieve educational excellence. Core to our founding principles was an unwavering faith that the communities we serve *can and will* deliver for their families if supported and resourced properly to do so. Now some 30 years later, we still believe in the unique promise of public education to help each of us reach our full potential.

Although a great deal has changed since our founding, unfortunately too much remains stubbornly the same. Students of color from underserved

backgrounds remain relegated to the back of the bus of educational opportunity. Teacher turnover is high; the political will to dramatically change the conditions is low. These schools receive less than 70 percent of what is spent on the public schools serving wealthy families, and yet expectations have never been more complex, the prospects of meeting those expectations never more complicated.

Partners has contributed, though, in a small way to one important thing that *has* changed.

We now *know* that chronic underperformance by students in the most challenged schools can be effectively and sustainably addressed. Partners has spent the last 30 years developing, refining, testing, and then expanding the implementation of an improvement science approach that has been shown to move these schools decidedly from the worst performers in their districts to on par with their peers. We've accomplished this in the most challenged urban centers—such as our home communities in the San Francisco Bay Area—and in other contexts far from our home, including the Mississippi Delta, western Michigan, and the home of our nation's founding, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. More importantly, we accomplished this working within districts' rules, support structures, resource practices, and school models rather than relying upon the more disruptive but typically less lasting and less sustainable "reforms." We got results by pouring into the teachers and leaders already serving in these schools—those showing up every day to deliver for other people's children against sometimes tremendous headwinds.

The foundational learning from spending all that time, effort, energy, and resources has been at once illuminating and obvious: Positive results really come down to investing in people. Everything we did only mattered because of what it *enabled teachers and leaders themselves* to do.

Our experiences remind us that education is a profoundly human enterprise—encompassing relationship-building, motivation, beliefs, and trust. Tragically, these needs are typically given short shrift by policymakers, as if improvement is something done by robots disembodied from the complexity of the communities in which they work.

Yet understanding a school's context and knowing the needs of its students and families have been shown to be key to successful improvement efforts. This is why brilliant thinkers, from Jonathan Kozol to Jeannie Oakes to Rudy Crew to Zaretta Hammond, have cautioned those who support schools to deeply understand the people and places where they work. Partners in School Innovation leans heavily on the writings of

these leaders and many others, as you'll see in the following chapters, and this book perhaps contributes a new potentially catalytic insight about the power of improvement science when focused on low-income communities of color.

This brings up a second learning from our decades of self-improvement work: implementing continuous improvement methods without a clear focus on equity simply supercharges and codifies opportunity gaps. We learned that maintaining a focus on equitable outcomes, and not just measurable improvement, requires getting much better at supporting schools in having frank conversations about the impact of racial oppression on their students, systems, and even on themselves. We recognized that our team can't help schools get better at facing this conundrum without having those conversations and challenging one another to face biases within ourselves.

This book is an extension of that challenge, urging educators to own the power of being leaders of change—not protectors of cherished pasts, but forgers of a new more powerful future for us all. To be a change agent requires facing your own personal truths about teaching and leading across lines of difference. This means understanding and embarking on your own equity journey, a process that everyone at Partners undertakes and which every educator featured in this book also has begun to do.

My own equity journey started in middle school on Chicago's west side in one of the city's since-shuttered K–8 schools, Robert Emmet Elementary. Like many of America's schools now, Emmett's student population mirrored the neighborhood, but the staff at the school did not. The students were all Black, like me, and our teachers were almost all white. Aside from occasionally wondering why these folks who obviously didn't live in the neighborhood drove from wherever to teach us, this didn't bother me as a kid because the teachers and leaders at Emmett paid me a lot of attention. I was that kid who tested well, talked a lot, and read the encyclopedia for fun, so I got a lot of positive reinforcement from teachers and especially the principal. The school staff worked extra hard to provide me with opportunities to be “challenged.” One such opportunity started me on my path to fighting for equity: an invitation to attend a science fair on the other side of town.

As a middle schooler, I had read somewhere that if we had a nuclear war, nothing but cockroaches would survive. This, for some reason, fascinated me. So I began a series of experiments to determine just what circumstances cockroaches could survive. I won't gross you out with the

details, except to say my very thorough experiments came to an abrupt halt when my mother, looking for leftovers to heat up, discovered the Tupperware container filled with my research “subjects” in the freezer. But before my research was abruptly shut down, I gave a class show-and-tell of my findings that was so much fun for my teacher that she and the principal managed to get me an invite to an official science fair at a middle school on Chicago’s north side.

This led to my mother and me, one early Saturday morning, taking a bus, a train, and another bus to a part of the city that I had never seen before. My mom dutifully carried my huge posterboard, which had dead roaches pinned above Polaroids and descriptions of my experiments.

As we got closer to the school where the competition was to take place, I was over the moon, seeing impossibly clean neighborhoods lined with trees and parks and beautiful homes braced with flower gardens. I kept asking my mom if we were still in Chicago.

When we arrived at the competition site, I was dumbfounded. We stood on the street looking at a majestic castle of a building surrounded by lawns on all sides, with a large garden on one corner, and additional playing fields out back. I had never seen a school that looked like this. I was expecting a place like Emmet: a factory-looking squarish building with gated windows and a mixture of concrete and tarmac on all sides.

Once inside, my awe continued as we joined others in line and followed the signs to the “science wing” of the school. This school had a science wing. Emmet didn’t even have science classrooms. We passed students with their parents carrying everything under the sun as part of their own presentations, and almost all of the students wore lab coats with their schools’ names on them. One student was carefully floating a helium balloon model of the space shuttle as his dad followed behind, pushing the tank of helium. Another had a model volcano on a rolling platform and was getting help from several people to maneuver it through double doors. I watched it pass by and looked at the posterboard my mother held and felt a pit open in my stomach.

Once in the lab, my mom checked us in, and we found the spot assigned to us. The huge, high-ceiling classroom had built-in lab stations lining the walls, all with running water, shelves, beakers, bottles filled with various substances, and, to my amazement, working gas burners. I imagined running my experiments there and not in the kitchen while my ma was sleeping. The other kids’ experiments left me in a state of wonder: a

fully dissected and autopsied pig, an aquarium designed to demonstrate a squid's ink-based protection mechanisms, and live snakes and ants, all of which I contrasted with my posterboard of dead roaches, which seemed pitiful in contrast.

In watching all the students set up their exhibits, it occurred to me suddenly that all of them were white. My mom and I were the only Black people in the room. My young mind started putting it all together then: Why does this school have rolling fields of green grass and Emmet is hemmed in by tarmac? Why do these kids get science lab coats? How does this school get a science wing with well-equipped classrooms when Emmet barely has paper and chalk (which our teachers would regularly buy with their own money midway through the year when initial supplies ran out)?

I looked again at my poster going up—that I was so proud of just a few moments ago—against all of the other exhibits, and I felt . . . well, shame. Which was followed quickly by anger. Burning, roiling, visceral anger.

Even then, I knew that pipes for water and gas didn't grow like vines. Someone decided to build these schools this way, which meant they also decided to build our school without them.

I asked my mom a critical question: "Ma, why do white people get to have gas burners in their science classes, and we don't even get science classrooms?"

My mom had finished setting up my presentation and was looking around at the happy, vibrant, and fun displays as they were going up. I tugged on her sleeve to get her attention, and she looked at me and replied, "I don't know, baby, but that's not what we're supposed to be worried about right now. You're supposed to be here to talk about cockroaches."

That's what I did. And for the young budding scientists, many of whom had never seen roaches up close before, or ever, my presentation was a big hit. But even as I grew more confident as I told and retold my learning story, I also felt somehow lessened by the experience.

On the long ride home, with my honorable-mention certificate, I wondered if the whole thing had been a setup. I wondered how people believed so little in the students at my school and apparently so much in the students on the northside of town. I knew even

then it had to do with race, and it seemed deeply unfair to me. “Who decided this,” I wondered, “and how do we make them reconsider?”

I returned to Emmet that Monday, and the principal treated me like a returning hero, announcing over the intercom my success and posting the certificate in the office award case for a time. I took the praise a little grudgingly and felt I needed to ask her about my experience.

I described for her what I saw, how I felt, and what I thought it meant. She sat in a chair next to me and took my hands in hers, and before I knew it, I was crying. To this day, I’m not sure why, but the combination of my shame and her comforting me made it all come out. She hugged me as I sobbed for a while, and after a bit, she said through her own tears, “You’re right, it isn’t fair. I honestly don’t know how things got this way, but maybe you’ll be the one to fix it.”

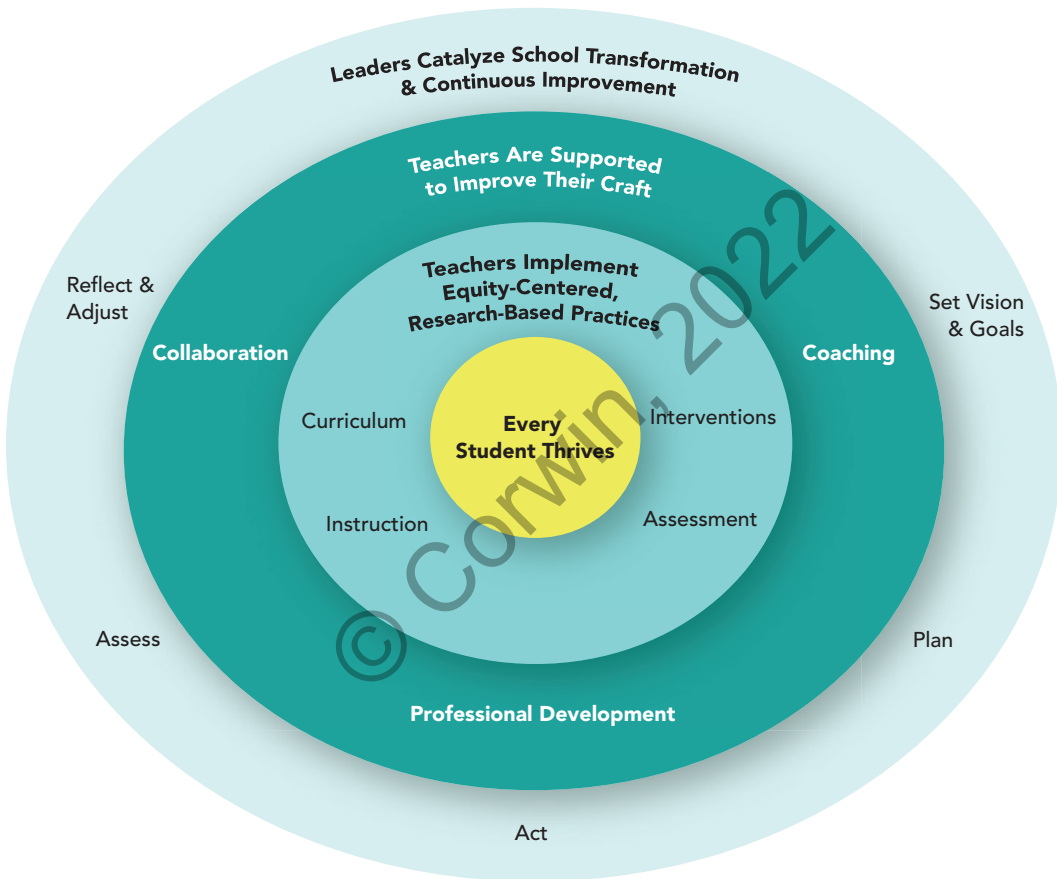
Looking back some 45 years later, I see that my equity journey began at that moment.

I know from personal experience that inside each of our children are multitudes of powerful positive futures. I know that all children, yes even—maybe particularly—the distracted and angry and unengaged ones, have the potential for brilliance and that our schools are our keys to unlocking that brilliance.

Our public school systems have built-in inequities, much like those in the aforementioned science labs, and the challenge of dismantling those structures is larger than any one teacher, principal, school, or district. But the truth is that teachers and leaders are the most underestimated force for transformational change in our country. They are already everywhere where improvement is needed. They are at the needed scale, equipped with a will to serve, and possess a myriad of competencies that position them to build relationships needed for lasting community transformation.

We have used our school transformation approach—which is illustrated in the stories in this book—to support schools and districts in eight states. The work is powerful, and the results speak for themselves. Our approach is symbolized by the following graphic, and we organized the book by prioritizing the center circle of the graphic, which is the core work that educators conduct with students and their families.

School Transformation Framework



The book begins with equity-centered teaching. Chapters 1 through 4 describe work in the innermost ring, where teachers implement practices that research has shown to be effective with low-income students of color. This is the driving force upon which broader systemic efforts must be based.

In Chapters 5 through 8 you will see school leaders and instructional coaches tackling the work in the next ring, producing a system of professional learning built on collaboration, professional development, and coaching.

The final three chapters, 9 through 11, focus on leaders at the school and district level establishing a continuous improvement method and mindset among their teams, as well as the benefits that arise from doing so.

All of these stories from real people—focusing on real problems within the very real constraints of their varied contexts—hold the ultimate message of this powerful work:

As we wake up from the nightmare of the pandemic, when everything seems to be unraveling and uncertainty is at its highest and hope at its dimmest, we see that the solution to producing schools that meet the needs of each of our children—schools that are lively, loving, learning communities—remains where it has always been. Teachers and leaders who show up every day, even risking their lives and the health of their families to pour into the children of our communities, *are* the solution.

You know that your communities are reeling from the difficulties of the last few years. You know that the political volatility and open hostility have nerves frayed and students, parents, and even your peers on edge. You know that many in your community have lost someone, lost their careers, lost their faith in our institutions, lost their connection to the community itself, or just lost hope.

You don't know what to do or where to start, yet kids are looking to you to help them heal and learn. Read on and you will find that, for our students with the greatest needs, you and your peers *are* the sources of hope you have been looking for.





Derek Mitchell has been the CEO of Partners in School Innovation since 2009. Before taking that position, he earned a PhD in educational psychology from UCLA; served as the director of technology and student achievement for the Oakland Unified School District in California; supported districtwide reform across the country for the Stupski Foundation;

and was the executive director of the Opportunity Zone in Prince George's County in Maryland.

Under Derek's leadership of "Partners," the organization has adapted to a dynamic educational landscape and grown to address an expanding need for equity-centered school improvement. Partners has joined with national funders such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation to help educators build their capacity to serve some of the most challenged communities in the United States. Along the way, Dr. Mitchell has published reflections about Partners' work in a variety of journals and blogs, such as *Phi Delta Kappan*, EdSource, and *Leadership* magazine.