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Are You a Change Agent?

1

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA



The mood in the teachers' lounge at César Chávez Elementary School was, in a word, skeptical.

And to be honest, kind of exhausted.

The three educators who made up the school's fourth-grade teaching team sat at a small table, eating their respective lunches, while sharing ambivalent glances between bites.

It was rare for teachers to dine together at Chávez, as the school had become a challenging place to work. It was the fall of 2010, and since the late 1990s, state officials in California had labeled this little school in East San Jose as "persistently failing." The school shared this strange label with hundreds of schools in California, not to mention thousands more across the country. Almost all of such schools served children and families whose identities were already marginalized by powerful institutions.

After two decades of government scolding and sanction, the teachers still in the building were either stalwarts or newbies, and almost nothing in between. Teaching at Chávez meant that you were either ruthlessly dedicated to serving the community's children or didn't yet understand the waters into which you were wading.

The reality of this situation sat uneasily on the fourth-grade teachers, who munched on an array of homemade sandwiches and mini carrots

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and yogurt cups, making nervous chitchat while they waited for a “guest” who was set to arrive any minute now.

The guest for whom they waited was supposed to help them navigate the complexities of school transformation, but if history was any indication, they were bound to be disappointed. Decades of empirical evidence and sociological study indicated that schools like Chávez needed more and different resources to best serve students. Federal and state school improvement policy, on the other hand, tended to ignore and minimize this reality. The fourth-grade team had witnessed, firsthand, many years of lawmaking that eschewed empirical research, while embracing the questionable logic that increasingly draconian sanctions would drive school improvement.

Adding insult to injury, these sorts of sanctions for struggling schools were preceded by decades of disinvestment in the public sector at large, leaving schools to act as the primary locus of public services for families, in lieu of an actual social safety net.

Hence, their skepticism.

These esoteric policy concerns, though, on most days only constituted background noise. While teachers at Chávez and other schools toiled to improve outcomes for children, the message that came through above the noise, often at a fever pitch, was that educators themselves were to blame for these decades of multidimensional institutional failure.

Bad test scores? “Blame the teachers!” Pandemic-induced school closures? “Blame the teachers!”

But what if both test scores and unsafe conditions in public schools are the consequence of centuries of racial segregation, propagated by an unjust housing market and compounded by decades of civic divestment and systemic mismanagement?

“You must not have heard us. BLAME THE TEACHERS!”

The fourth-grade teachers at Chávez had, in fact, heard.

They were used to hearing all of this—and worse—but they patiently, and somewhat dubiously, waited for the person who was scheduled to join them for lunch on this particular day.

The guest for whom they waited for was a former teacher in the district named Meaghen. Meaghen also was anxious about the meeting. She had been brought back to the school, through a partnership with a local nonprofit organization, to serve as a coach. In the preceding weeks, she had attempted to make herself feel at home at Chávez, but because of space constraints, she was working out of a repurposed supply closet that smelled like lunchroom detritus. When she tried to hide the smell by spraying ridiculous quantities of “Paradise Breeze” air freshener, the closet ended up smelling like “Paradise Breeze”-scented trash.

Meaghen had been introduced to the teachers at a faculty meeting the week before by René Sanchez, the principal, who described her as an improvement coach who was “here to help.”

(Aside: Nobody will blame you if you just laughed or rolled your eyes.)

Most educators, especially those who have spent time in the crosshairs of school improvement regimes, have encountered a bevy of slick consultants from “the outside.” These self-appointed experts show up at schools, often armed with a PowerPoint presentation and “The Answer”—capital T, capital A—for how to improve struggling schools. The teachers at Chávez had heard this song and dance many, many times before, and they were not eager to hear it again.

To the surprise of the fourth-grade team, though, Meaghen was singing a different tune.

She walked into the lounge, the faint smell of “Paradise Breeze” still trailing behind her. She sat down at the table, with obvious humility, and said, “I bet you think I’m going to tell you I have ‘The Answer.’ I don’t. Mostly, I’m here to ask you questions—one question, in particular.”

The teachers shared a glance, then gestured for her to continue.

“Has anyone ever asked **you**,” Meaghen said, “what **you** think needs to happen to make this school great?”

What if We Told You That You’re Not the Problem . . . but That You’re the Solution?

Being a classroom educator has never been harder, so if the Chávez teachers’ cocktail of anxiety, ambivalence, and hope sounds familiar to you, you’re not alone.

Surveys conducted in the last 10 years indicate that teacher job satisfaction is at a quarter-century low, and that was *before* the pandemic. The combination of declining real resources for schools, increased expectations for teachers, greater public scrutiny, and more high-stakes accountability has destabilized the profession, making many educators' lives miserable in the process. COVID-19 only worsened the situation, with acute health and safety concerns layered on top of the uncertainty of toggling between virtual and in-person schooling at a moment's notice.

Plenty of people pay lip service to the notion that the joy has been sucked out of teaching, but few education leaders seem willing to do anything with that information. Teachers, meanwhile, are tasked with solving social problems well outside their spans of control, at the same time as we expect them to help young people thrive against the never-static backdrop of our contemporary world. When teachers *are* invited to the table for policy conversations, it can seem like an afterthought, being asked to opine on decisions that were already made.

In short, educators work against difficult odds, with a fraction of the resources necessary to do the job, all while garnering unconscionably little respect from the populace at large.

And what do teachers do in response?

Show up every . . . single . . . day . . . and rise to the challenge anyway, for as Shirley Chisholm once said, "If they don't invite you to the table, bring in a folding chair."

But wouldn't it be nice if you didn't have to bring a folding chair? What would it actually look like for teachers to be at the center of discussions about school transformation?

This question is more important than ever, as educators everywhere struggle to make sense of the chaos wrought by unprecedented times. Marginalized communities, as usual, experienced the most devastating consequences of the pandemic, but even the most privileged people and institutions can't escape the fallout. Chronic uncertainty is an unfortunate historical reality in communities that experience systemic underresourcing, but the destabilization is a new phenomenon for folks accustomed to privilege.

Fortunately, we have proven models for how to—and how not to—engage educators in driving transformational change against unpredictable headwinds.

Unfortunately, most government-sanctioned “school improvement” work ignores those lessons.

To understand why this happens, a short digression into the recent history of school improvement policy is useful; but if that kind of stuff bores you, please feel free to skip ahead to the section titled, “OK, Cool, Got You, but What Do We Do Now?”

In Which We Digress, Ever so Briefly, to Establish Some Historical Policy Context

For the last 30 years or so, lawmakers have tried to legislate the improvement of schools.

While educators on the ground have worked hard to do this work for literally generations, the contemporary school improvement zeitgeist was birthed from the federal government’s decision, at the turn of the 21st century, to hold states and their schools accountable for annual gains on standardized tests. Measuring performance in a transparent way isn’t a bad idea, in theory; but for the last generation, “accountability” in education was often oversimplified as “testing,” and that dumbing down of important concepts did real harm to the profession.

First and foremost, measuring schools with tests meant that almost all schools identified as “struggling” served high concentrations of children from Black, Latinx, and low-income families. Testing became a proxy for privilege, and not much more. Centuries of institutional racism and underinvestment have created significant and measurable disparities in wealth, income, housing, and health for marginalized folks, so there’s no surprise that these factors manifest in public schooling too. Annual testing played a role in making these disparities more obvious to lay people, but identifying problems is most useful when our methods of assessment offer clues for how to solve them.

Testing, as we know, did not do that. While standardized tests, used in narrow ways, can provide broad insights, education policymakers in the last two decades started to use tests in ways for which they were never intended, like teacher evaluation. This heightened focus on testing usually came with few resources for pursuing improvement strategies. Schools that struggled to serve marginalized children were told to get better . . . or else. The scolding rarely came with both resources and support, and sometimes even came with financial consequences,

due to federal regulations requiring states to divert funds to private companies.

It's no surprise, then, that the accountability era in education left a graveyard of "*pre-failed educational strategies*" in its wake. A pre-failed strategy is something that was never going to work, like covering up a pothole with construction paper. Pre-failed school improvement approaches were fated to go awry, not just because they were designed to address the wrong underlying problems, but because they rarely incorporated the perspectives of educators like you.

OK, Cool, Got You, but What Do We Do Now?

The era of high-stakes accountability in American schools will end in a protracted whimper and not with a bang. Federal monetary investment in school improvement peaked in the Obama administration, and states continue to roll back strict accountability measures. Since 2020, the systemic response to the COVID-19 pandemic has consumed most of the energy in the public sector, and schools have been no exception, meaning that public attention to testing, and the outcomes they illuminate, is minimal.

But let's not get confused: While test-based accountability, and the draconian improvement strategies that followed, may have fallen out of favor, we still have massive challenges in our schools, particularly those that serve our most marginalized families. Schools should be our country's great equalizers, but instead they often perpetuate—or even exacerbate—our society's biggest inequities.

If this mental struggle sounds familiar, maybe that's why you picked up this book in the first place.

You know that there are issues with how our schools serve the kids who need us the most, but most of the solutions on the table seem disconnected, antiquated, and inadequate. In the midst of all of that, despite lots of speechifying to the contrary, you're pretty sure that the problem is not you but the system itself, which was *never* designed with *all* of our kids—not to mention the realities of the real world—in mind.

And you know what? You're right. You're not the problem.

In fact, you might be the solution.

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA



René Sanchez, the principal of Chávez Elementary School, was eager for his fourth-grade teachers to disprove the conventional wisdom about “failing schools,” a label he despised.

René had started his career as a teacher at Chávez in the 1990s. Even then, the school had an outsized reputation for being a place where chronic underperformance was met with community resistance. In the community organizing text, *A Match on Dry Grass*, Chávez at that time is described as a place where hundreds of parents would show up to community meetings wearing bright yellow t-shirts and stickers that proclaimed “70%”—for the number of eighth graders who couldn’t read at grade level.

By the time René came back to be principal in 2009, Chávez was still the lowest-performing elementary school in the Alum Rock Union School District. That district, which is among the poorest in the United States, is located in one of the wealthiest cities in the history of the world: San Jose, California. Nestled on the fringes of Silicon Valley, San Jose is home to more billionaires and millionaires per capita than any other place in America.

In a more equitable country, such an extraordinary concentration of wealth might lead to unparalleled public services. The dystopian disparities of American civic governance, however, mean that while the founders of Facebook and Apple live in the apricot groves of San Jose’s western hills, the Alum Rock community is in the flatlands of East San Jose, where most families live in poverty. The district serves over 10,000 students, almost all of whom are Spanish-speaking, and close to 90 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch at school, which is a proxy for measuring poverty.

While the community pressure of the 1990s led to modest improvements in the school’s appearance, the cosmetic shifts could not hide basic educational facts: Just a small percentage of Alum Rock students would go on to achieve postsecondary academic success,

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and the educational outcomes at Chávez were dire enough to land the school on the short list of schools in the country that struggle the most.

René soon discovered that being the principal of such a school didn't leave a person with a lot of wiggle room. He tried making some bold changes during his first year as principal, but the measurable results were disappointing. Before his second year as principal, the district superintendent had a sit-down with René to let him know that the clock was ticking. If the school didn't improve the coming year, the superintendent warned, he might have to invoke "reconstitution," which, under federal regulations, would mean removing half of the staff and assigning them to other schools.

Drastic, to say the least.

René was dead set against reconstitution. He, more than anyone, knew that school was still struggling, but he had only been principal for a year, and having grown up in the community—not to mention having spent his whole career as an educator in Alum Rock—he knew that things could get better.

René was ready to take matters into his own hands, but given the prior year's lackluster results, he conceded that he needed help. To avoid reconstitution, he and the superintendent came to a tentative agreement: René would have one more year to show measurable improvement. To help accelerate progress, he would have to accept some support from an instructional coach who was steeped in the classroom and also trained to lead a new, teacher-centric model for school transformation.

That's how Meaghen ended up in the old supply closet.

Educators Don't Need to Wait for Someone Else to Ignite the Change

While high-stakes testing was disruptive to many schools, the accountability era's overt focus on results introduced two inescapable truths into mainstream conversation about schools.

The first fact is hard to swallow: Many struggling schools show up on the governments' lists every year, meaning that *persistent* underperformance is a reality for a subset of schools. Some schools, *even when compared with schools with comparable demographics*, collapse into cycles of replicating underwhelming outcomes, and after spending enough time in that cycle, it's really hard to escape. The situation is a little like crossing the event horizon of a black hole or being trapped in the Matrix: You have a nagging suspicion that something is wrong, but there's no obvious off-ramp. The persistent struggles of schools like these have caused some policymakers to argue that school improvement is a fruitless endeavor that isn't even worth pursuing. "Bad schools will always be bad," they argue, "so let's not throw good money after bad."

That logic is wrong, and we know this because of the second inescapable fact: The accountability era's relentless emphasis on measurement revealed that *some schools break the cycle*. The existence of schools that don't fit the mold, by beating the odds and shattering the pattern of underperformance, should be a source of enormous hope and celebration. Instead, many policymakers reject the study of those schools and want to dismiss them as "outliers" that we should ignore—a glitch in the Matrix, if you will.

We think that those schools, and the adults who work in them, should be our focus.

Because once you know that transformation is possible, it's hard to look away. And when you look more closely, you start to see success stories everywhere—sharp little glimmers of light and hope dotting a landscape of paper-covered potholes.

Those glimmers of hope inspired this book because they caused us to wonder this: What would happen if we gave educators the tools necessary to change the odds for themselves?

For the last 30 years, the educators at Partners in School Innovation, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization, have been working shoulder-to-shoulder with educators to accelerate school change, and through pursuing that work, dramatic transformation seems to happen. A lot.

We think it can happen even more.

That's where you come in. We think that you and some other folks at your school need to be in on this action.

Before we go any further, though, it's important to be honest about what it takes to accomplish sustainable transformation in challenging

educational environments. The work is hard, and it takes a long time. Think years, not weeks. During those years, some of your peers will be annoyed at you for embracing what they view as unrealistic ambitions, especially at a time when schools are already beset by seemingly endless challenges. You know how Mrs. Howard usually gives Janine's youthful enthusiasm side-eye on *Abbott Elementary*, but then ends up helping out in the end? It'll be sort of like that.

Meanwhile, spoiler alert! There aren't any silver-bullet solutions or shortcuts. You'll experience many setbacks in the process, and you will almost certainly need to make unpopular, counterintuitive decisions in the process.

Does that sound like something you might be interested in taking on?

You're still with me?

Cool.

Because do you know how transformation starts? It's usually when an educator like you decides to do things a different way.

That's how you become a change agent.