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School Transformation Requires Personal Transformation

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WILLIAM E. MCBRIDE SCHOOL,
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David Cohen wasn't sure how many hours of his life as a school principal should involve managing the physical and emotional aftermath of student altercations, but he was pretty sure the answer wasn't "most." It was the spring of 2015, and David was wrapping the second semester of a challenging new principalship. After many years of being in his comfort zone as mediator, motivator, negotiator, and de-escalator, the drama was starting to wear on him.

Early in his career, David had relished—even craved—the daily thrill of knowing that anything could happen during a school day. He had grown up just across the border from Philadelphia, in the Bala Cynwyd section of the "Mainline," where windy suburban roads collide with the final throes of West Philly. He started college, thinking he would become a lawyer, but a year of student teaching was enough to reroute his dreams. He fell in love with being in a school: forging relationships with kids and their families, learning new classroom skills, and becoming a confidant to his fellow teachers. He skipped law school entirely and never looked back.

David came to love the unglamorous "nuts and bolts" parts of running a school, which many of his peers avoided. Processes and procedures made intuitive sense to him, as did building the relationships necessary to implement those systems. His affinity for sweating the small stuff made him an ideal candidate for administration, which is how he ended up at the helm at William E. McBride, a K-8 school in the area.

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David's penchant for the particularities, though, started to become a burden before his first year at McBride was over. Fights among students were common, which was an unfortunate consequence of broader trends in the neighborhood. McBride's corner of the Philly region often lands on lists that most communities would prefer to avoid, like "American zip codes with highest rates of gun violence."

At an intellectual level, David knew that he couldn't single-handedly stop students from fighting, but that didn't stop him from trying. He personally—and physically—intervened during spats on school grounds. If voices started to escalate in the hallways, David would be there before anyone noticed that he had left the office. If something popped off on the way to school, David wanted to know all the details, conducting detailed post-conflict investigations that gave him a fleeting sense of control.

"Who did what to whom?" he would ask. "Why did this happen? What's going on outside of school that I need to know about? How are we going to make sure this doesn't happen again?"

For all of his professed love for being involved in the nitty-gritty, he started to hit the wall at the end of his first year at McBride. Each day seemed to follow a similar pattern: He showed up at school ready for whatever the morning would bring, but within a few minutes of arrival, a threat to student safety would throw him into crisis mode. He was skipping leadership-team meetings, shortchanging classroom observations, and relegating to the back burner anything that wasn't related to preventing fistfights.

Being so reactive was taking a toll on David's psyche, not to mention his sense of self. He began to realize that the things that had made him great as a novice school leader weren't working anymore. Even more troubling, the same skills that had propelled him to this point in his career now seemed to be the very things holding him back.

One morning, he reached a breaking point. He was standing at the school's front door, greeting students as they arrived on a cool spring day. He was smiling, shaking hands, making eye contact, and enjoying the little interactions he relished having with the hundreds of children who walk to McBride every day.

And then, his neck stiffened as he saw the telltale signs: A group of students running in his direction. Yells from further down the block. Scuffed knees. Papers fluttering out of backpacks. The aftermath of a fight.

He ran toward the action, abandoning his post at the front door.

While he sprinted down the street, preparing to pull kids off each other, he couldn't help hearing a troubled voice inside his head: "This can't be the way this works. Something's gotta give."

Everyone Hits the Wall

The ancient ritual of the marathon is a classic metaphor for describing a person's enduring commitment to long, arduous tasks. But while the analogy has a way of glorifying persistence, it misses the fact that distance running takes an enormous physical toll on human bodies.

When a person trains for a marathon, they are, for all intents and purposes, teaching their body how to sustain long bouts of abuse. The physical integrity of the skeleton is put on trial. The constant pounding of fragile feet on hard pavement wreaks havoc on the tiny bones and ligaments in a person's extremities. The knees absorb the systemic shock of a body's weight collapsing on a single inflection point over and over and over again. Lactic acid accumulates in the muscular system, causing sustained cramps, burning, and other unpleasant sensations.

Preparing for stress in the musculoskeletal system, though, is secondary to the mental trauma. The physical body can accustom itself to relentless force through pain management wizardry, training repetition, and sports snacks. The truly hard part of finishing a marathon, by most accounts, is managing the fragile interaction between one's mental state and long-term energy stores.

Despite advances in shoe technology, sugary beverages, and protein bars, most folks "hit the wall" at some point when they try to run a marathon. Wherever it happens along the 26.2 mile journey, "hitting the wall" is code for that time at which your body can no longer process energy fast enough to keep up with your brain. Some call it "extreme fatigue"; *Runners World* once described it as your brain whispering to your body that it has reached a breaking point.

School transformation work, as we mentioned many chapters before expanding this tortured metaphor, is more of a marathon than a sprint. When you and your crew string together weekly ROCI cycles into monthly reviews, and those monthly reviews become fodder for annual goal setting, and then you come back in the second and third and fourth years of transformation, and there's *still* a lot of work left to do, the relentless reality of the work sets in.

And so, as with marathons, almost everyone who engages in school transformation will “hit the wall.” Unlike the neurochemical sensation afflicting distance runners, the educational wall is socioemotional in nature. Symptoms include frequent bouts of crying in the faculty lounge, stress dreams about test prep, snapping at your assistant principal, and asking your spouse to ROCI chore schedules.

Not all the symptoms are so obvious, though. Sometimes, hitting the wall manifests as a mild malaise, which can be just as jarring, as society expects our most passionate change agents to be enthusiastic cheerleaders. Other times, “the wall” looks like cynicism, pessimism, or even regret for having taken up school transformation work in the first place. The feeling may be invisible to others but debilitating to you.

“Why am I bothering to do this?” you might wonder. “Why did I choose to do this? I don't have to be doing this. Nobody is really making me do this. It's so much work. Am I a lunatic?”

First, no, you are not a lunatic.

But you, too, may have hit the wall, as just about every change agent will.

When you do hit the wall, the most important thing to remember is that you are not alone. Every story in this book describes a team effort, and that's intentional; no single person gets to be the savior in the story of school change. We are stronger together, and having a crew ensures that there is no singular person upon whose mental state the entirety of a school's future hinges.

That said, transforming a school requires each of us to reach beyond our current abilities, fears, and limitations. This chapter is about the personal work and growth that must happen in tandem with school transformation.

A big part of personal growth is ensuring that the pursuit of school improvement doesn't overwhelm us beyond our ability to function, so the first step in combating the wall is to take care of yourself. While the concept of “self-care” has become a bit of a buzzword, there are many

pragmatic reasons to attend to your own well-being while in pursuit of significant goals. Ancient wisdom teaches that you can't pour from an empty cup, and an anonymous lumberjack (not Abraham Lincoln, to whom the quote is often misattributed) said that, given several hours to chop down a tree, a person should spend the bulk of the time sharpening the saw.

Whichever old saw (pun intended) you prefer, in this chapter we'll talk about filling up your cup, sharpening your tools, and making sure that the work of transformation becomes a self-renewing well of inspiration and not an albatross around your and your crew's collective necks.

WILLIAM E. MCBRIDE SCHOOL, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



Richard Allen was born into slavery in Delaware in 1760, and when he became a free person for the first time at 20, he did what many newly liberated Black men of the period aspired to do.

He moved to Philly.

Richard made the short trek north because Philadelphia in the late 18th century offered something exceedingly rare: a thriving community of free Black families. Such places were hard to find at the time, even in the North, because while everyone knows how slavery metastasized throughout the South, the noxious institution was still legal throughout the North for most of the 1700s. Pennsylvania finally abolished the practice the year Richard arrived, New York followed suit the following year, and New Jersey moved toward gradual abolition in 1804.

Delaware—from whence Richard came—didn't officially abolish chattel slavery until 1901, three decades after the rest of the country ratified the Thirteenth Amendment.

Within a few years of setting up shop in Philly, Richard Allen was a popular local preacher. When local white churches forbade him and other Black pastors from preaching to their flocks, he founded Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first congregation of what

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would become a flourishing global institution and the first free Black denomination of Protestantism in the world.

From his perch at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Richard rose quickly to become a central organizer and preacher in the burgeoning national abolitionist movement, whose spiritual center was in Philadelphia. When Harriet Tubman escaped from a Maryland plantation in the 1840s, she found refuge among the abolitionist Philadelphians; the city became an indispensable hub for her Underground Railroad activities and a permanent home for her descendants.

Despite this rich, radical history, the City of Brotherly Love hasn't always shared that love back with its Black citizenry. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, when hundreds of thousands of Black Southerners moved north as part of the Great Migration, Philadelphia was one of the most popular destinations due to the perception of widespread equal opportunity.

The perception turned out to be too rosy.

The region's building trades, transportation industry, and military contractors often refused to hire Black laborers, a discriminatory practice cheered on by the city's white-led labor unions. When courts and the federal government intervened in unfair labor practices, the city turned to another tried-and-true form of urban racism: real estate. Redlining, collusion among mortgage lenders, and racial violence divided communities along color lines and created the Philadelphia suburbs, which exploded between 1940 and 1960. In that same period, large sections of Philadelphia went from being mixed race to almost entirely Black. North Philadelphia, with the highest concentration of Black families, went from under 30 percent to almost 70 percent African American during that 20-year period.

The city subsequently made fledgling attempts to drive greater racial understanding and integration, but de facto segregation continued through the 1960s, when the city hired its first Black superintendent of schools. By the time David Cohen—a child of the same suburbs created by racial segregation—became the principal of McBride, the school's neighborhood was almost entirely African American.

David arrived at William E. McBride at an inflection point for both the school and himself. The prior decade of public education around Philadelphia had been turbulent, even by the standards of American schooling. Persistent “fiscal” and “managerial” problems caused the state of Pennsylvania to intervene in some local schools, placing them under the control of a “school reform commission,” whose actions only seemed to exacerbate fiscal crises. The problem got so bad that in 2012 the commission issued a “master facilities plan” that included a list of 37 area schools slated to close.

McBride was on the list.

The families of the neighborhood—many of which counted three generations of McBride graduates—had other plans. They organized direct actions, held interventions at community hearings, and collected petitions from residents, making bold arguments for the school to remain open.

Their strategy worked. When the commission announced its final plans later the next school year, the decision to close McBride was reversed.

The community’s celebration of grassroots victory was short-lived, however. The revised plan required closing a different school, four blocks from McBride, and sending the dislocated students to a consolidated McBride-based campus. The complications of merging two proximate K–8 schools quickly became apparent. McBride’s enrollment doubled overnight, from 300 to 600, and because the region’s fiscal problems never abated, consolidation came with a mandate to “do more with less.” Instead of getting additional resources, the combined school had fewer counselors, nurses, assistant principals, after-school clubs, secretaries, and school lunch staff than the aggregate schools had before the merger.

David became principal during this fragile transition because of his reputation for attending to detail, caring for communities, and getting in the proverbial weeds. He joined a staff of veterans, and he jumped into the job with vigor. He dove deep into school operations, overseeing the minutiae of lesson planning, classroom bell schedules, and lunch duty assignments.

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His dwelling in the details, though, made focusing on long-term challenges harder. When David rushed to stop a fracas, other priorities at the school suffered. Everyone noticed, especially Cynthia Moultrie, the schools' most senior teacher leader. Cynthia had worked at the school for the entirety of her multidecade career, first as a kindergarten teacher and later as an instructional coach. She had grown up in the neighborhood and knew multiple generations of every family in the building.

Cynthia's observation came from a place of love. She could tell that David's heart was in the right place and that he was the right principal for the school, which was saying a lot, given David was a white man coming into a predominantly Black school with a large faculty of experienced educators. Teaching in the community required a long-term commitment, and Cynthia saw that level of dedication in David from day one.

To cultivate that commitment to longevity, Cynthia used her perch as a coach to help the school develop, embrace, and propagate a mantra about student success. "At McBride," Cynthia says, "we are big on the power of YET. If a student can't do something, we don't say that they can't. They just haven't done it YET."

After spending many hours working with David to structure team meetings, build schedules, and talk about data, it was clear that he wanted to work on the big picture. It wasn't that he didn't care about the long-term things that didn't involve the nitty-gritty of day-to-day management.

He just hadn't gotten to them YET.

There Is No Improvement Without Reflection

The power of "YET" is a catchy encapsulation of the growth mindset necessary to engage in school improvement. There are no transformational schools full of stagnant professionals, and a big reason that systemic improvements often stall is that we hit plateaus of personal growth and don't know what to do next. Improvement, though, starts with the self. ROCI was designed to accelerate school transformation, sure, but cycles of inquiry do not happen unless individuals learn and experience concomitant personal transformation.

To this point in the book, we've talked about the ways in which ROCI shapes educational practice. By structuring microtargets for weekly improvement, we set goals, plan, execute strategies, and assess whether or not what we've been doing is working.

But there's a fourth part of ROCI that comes after all the planning, doing, and assessing: It's called "reflect and adjust." The act of reflecting on our practice and then adjusting based on what we've learned is an indispensable part of continuous improvement, but it often takes a back seat to the more technical parts of the process.

This omission is a colossal mistake.

Professionals shortchange reflection for all sorts of reasons. More often than not, "time" is to blame, which we discussed in Chapter 4. When our work feels—and is!—both urgent and important, the act of stepping back can feel like an unearned luxury. We also deprioritize reflection because it can be uncomfortable. When things don't go well, reflection means figuring out where we went wrong, sometimes resulting in finger-pointing and hurt feelings. When we succeed, it may feel superfluous to backtrack and nitpick what could have gone better.

Whatever the reason, no part of the ROCI process experiences as much disinterest and disrespect as the act of reflection, but if you want to live that transformation life, you must reflect.

To ensure that reflection is a part of your daily hygiene, build explicit guardrails for the practice. Find a place amenable to deep mental work, where you won't be interrupted. Make it clear that you intend to use this space for sustained reflection. It might feel strange at first, but block an hour in your calendar every week for "thinking." Keep this time sacred and don't let other people intrude. Your crew should do something similar on a collective basis. You're already meeting in grade-level teams, right? Use some of that time on a monthly basis for reflection.

When you start to reflect habitually, you'll notice changes. First, you will avoid repeating mistakes, thereby preventing bad-habit formation. Fun fact about ROCI: The most common reason that things don't go well the first time a crew commits to a change is that people don't actually do what they said they would do. Why does that happen? There are lots of potential reasons, but you'll never figure it out until you start reflecting and asking why. Some teams even adopt the practice of asking "Five Whys." The logic behind the Five Whys exercise is that you can reach the root cause of just about any problem by asking "Why?" five times. The exercise can feel weird, even a bit childish, but revelatory ideas emerge when we embrace routines that force deeper reflection.

The reflection process also enhances our ability to give and receive feedback. Improvement of the self, and the institutions we inhabit, requires us to be open to hearing uncomfortable things about our practice. One simple protocol that crews can use here is a “Plus/Deltas t-chart.” After attempting to try something new, reflect on what went well and what you could do differently next time. On the left side of the chart, list the “Pluses,” and on the right side, the “Deltas,” or things you might change. Notice that it’s not “Pluses” and “Minuses.” That’s intentional because there’s a lot less negativity inherent in discussing what we’d do “differently” versus what we would do “better.” Some teams call this “Glow and Grow” or “Pluses and Pushes.” No matter what you call it, do the exercise right after the work itself, so the areas for growth are fresh in your mind.

Finally, and for the sake of your prolonged mental state throughout the marathon of school transformation, the act of mandated reflection injects necessary time and space into the cadence of otherwise unyielding transformation work. Derek Mitchell, the CEO of Partners in School Innovation, says, “When you’re cooking up important things, sometimes you have to let them sit and simmer.” Unfortunately, the world we live in thrives on manufactured urgency and not careful analysis. As a result, our ideas and brains often end up half-cooked.

Doing a half-baked job at school transformation was not in the McBride crew’s plans, so Cynthia, David, and their crew went to work reflecting on what they could do better, together.