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The Road Less Traveled:

Changing Schools from the Inside Out

By Bryan Goodwin

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We're all familiar with Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," often evoked as a triumphant homage to individualism, urging us to strike out on our own and follow unconventional paths wherever they may lead. Yet as literary critics point out, such exhortations get it wrong. Frost may have really been trying to convey a more complex and wistful truth: namely, how we tend to fool ourselves into thinking we've made good decisions—or even decisions at all—when in truth, we might have been victims of a coin toss of fate (Orr, 2015).

Roughly 30 years ago, American educators stood at a crossroads, with a decision to make about the future of education. With our ears ringing of warnings that we were facing a "rising tide of mediocrity" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and recognizing unacceptable gaps in achievement between disadvantaged students and others, we set off down a path of reform that has, in the words of Frost, "made all the difference"—or has it? One thing we know for sure is that it altered how we have gone about running our schools.

Significant reform efforts—the standards-based education movement, the passage of No Child Left Behind, the Common Core—have come with plenty of good intentions, chief among them to focus the entire system on the success of *all* students. And yet our current path of reform has had numerous unintended consequences. We have consumed educators with making sense of vague and voluminous standards (Schmoker, 2014; Marzano & Kendall, 1998). They've had to shoulder the burden of layers of testing for students, who now take as many as 20 standardized tests per year (Lazarín, 2014). Teachers and school leaders find their performance rated on complex, yet error-ridden, formulas and now report rising stress levels, resulting in churn among principals and teachers fleeing the profession (Butrymowicz & Garland, 2012; MetLife, 2012; Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Strauss, 2015). Students drop out of school when they don't see how standardized learning is relevant to them (Bridgeland,

Dilulio, & Morison, 2006), and we respond by wishing they had more "grit" to power through anyway (Smith, 2014).

Running in place

As a system, we're working harder than ever before, yet running in place. Across the U.S., as the shock of accountability wears off, states and districts have hit performance plateaus (Goodwin, 2015). A recent review of 17 years of performance data determined that better standards and test-driven accountability resulted in some incremental performance gains of the lowest-achieving students in the lowest-performing states, but did little to improve pedagogy or student performance overall (Goodman, 2012). And it remains unclear whether standards and test-driven accountability have done anything to create more consistent, high-quality instruction; a decade into such reform efforts, close observations of U.S. classrooms found that only 7 percent of 994 students in the study benefitted from strong teaching over three years (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007).

So it's perhaps not surprising that on international comparisons, the U.S. has seen only small increases as other nations have surpassed us (OECD, 2012), often by following very different paths to reform (Sahlberg, 2012). For example, on the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which attempts to measure higher-order skills, U.S. students performed below average in math and roughly average in reading and science, with little change over time; moreover, contrary to what we might like to presume—that we do a better job educating all students and still have the best and brightest students in the world—the U.S. had a higher proportion than average of the lowest-performing students and a lower proportion of top-performing ones (OECD, 2012). While we in the U.S. have been using high-stakes testing to drive system improvements, leading performers such as Finland, Singapore, and Shanghai, China, dramatically changed their focus from *teaching*

facts to *deeper learning*, from narrowly focused curricula to providing students with more personalized learning choices, and away from high-stakes test performance as the sole goal of education to the development of well-rounded graduates with highly toned cognitive and non-cognitive skills and intelligences (OECD, 2012).

Stepping back

Nationwide, we appear to have devoted countless resources, time, and energy to creating a complex, onerous, top-down system of reform while neglecting one vitally important element: our students—and whether they care about any of this at all. Consider this: Recently, a team of researchers found a simple incentive (e.g., a $10 reward)—introduced on the day of the test—persuaded students to take high-stakes tests more seriously, resulting in performance bump equivalent to *six months* of additional learning (Levitt, List, Neckerman, & Sadoff, 2012). Although the researchers seemed to think they had shown how external rewards could boost performance, what they really may have discovered is how little effort students are putting into tests on which their schools and teachers are being held accountable.

"The current milieu of reform so surrounds us that, like fish in water, we often don't see it. We still labor under behaviorist assumptions that if we can just employ the right carrots and sticks for students, teachers, and administrators, our education system will function more rationally..."

The current milieu of reform so surrounds us that, like fish in water, we often don't see it. We still labor under behaviorist assumptions that if we can just employ the right carrots and sticks (for students, teachers, and administrators), our education system will function more rationally, like a business. However, successful modern businesses, like GoreTex, Toyota, Southwest Airlines, Apple, and Google, have long since abandoned this grey-flannel-suit thinking, choosing instead to motivate people by providing them with a sense of purpose, increasing their autonomy and personal responsibility, and encouraging their growth as individuals (Pink, 2009; Deutschman, 2006; Sinek, 2011).

Finding a better way

Might there be a better way to improve our schools than imposing reforms from the top down? Consider for a moment how we usually go about reform. We start by identifying a gap that needs to be filled. Not so long ago, for example, policymakers decided that the best way to improve student achievement would be to create tougher appraisal systems, including linking teacher evaluation to test scores. States and districts scrambled to develop new frameworks and complex formulas to incorporate the results of standardized achievement tests into teacher ratings. They sent principals to training sessions so they would learn how to apply the new frameworks consistently, and teachers spent countless hours in training on the new evaluation standards.

Ostensibly, the aim of all this effort was to improve student learning, although it was never entirely clear how well the new teacher evaluation frameworks (some of which contained more than 100 elements) related to student learning or whether getting tough on teachers would actually improve their ability to teach students (Schmoker, 2012). And it still remains unclear whether these efforts have resulted in (or will ever result in) higher student achievement (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012). Indeed, some evidence suggests that trying to motivate teacher performance with such incentives may actually *diminish* student performance (Fryer, 2012).

The point here is not that we shouldn't care about teacher quality. We should. Nor is there anything wrong with using appraisal to clarify what good teaching looks like. Even value-added measures may have a small role to play in double-checking teacher ratings against school performance. The real issue here is the tangle of

flawed assumptions that drove this approach (and many like it) in the first place—starting with trying to drive complex change with extrinsic rewards, which only boost performance on straightforward tasks (Pink, 2009). What we want teachers to do, though, is far from simple; indeed, educating all children well is something that then-Secretary of Education Rod Paige observed, upon passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, no society "in the history of human civilization" has ever done.

Meeting such a challenge will require inspiring teachers and school leaders to be creative, innovative, and engaged in ongoing learning themselves. Therein lies a second fundamental flaw with top-down approaches: We can't force anyone to learn anything; knowledge rarely enters anyone's head involuntarily. To learn something, we must *want* to learn it.

Students are no different, of course. We can tinker all we want with the system that surrounds them, but if students aren't motivated to learn, they won't. Recognizing this, many educators, reflecting the same behaviorist paradigm that afflicts them, resort to staging test-day pep rallies and doling out gold stars, grades, and class rankings to get students to pay attention to stuff that they otherwise wouldn't much care to learn (Kohn, 1999) or even need to learn, for that matter. Today's employers want people with leadership, communication, teamwork, complex problem-solving abilities (Adams, 2014)—things that rarely get measured on standardized tests.

Unleashing the power of curiosity

What if, instead of pushing reforms from the top down, we worked from the *inside out*? That is, what if we started by putting student engagement, motivation, and true problem-solving abilities at the heart of everything we do? Might everything else get easier? And what if we captured the concept of student engagement and motivation in a potent and familiar, yet rarely considered, outcome for students: *curiosity*. In the fullest sense of the word, curiosity reflects more than just fleeting interest; instead, it's a powerful driver for learning, exploring, questioning, critical thinking, and creative problem-finding and solving. Some of our best, most curious thinkers come to mind, like Ben Franklin, George Washington Carver, Marie Curie, Jane Goodall, and Walt Disney.

As curiosity grows, it pulls many other desirable student characteristics, like motivation, passion, engagement, growth-mindedness, inquiry, and wonder, into its orbit. But what may be most powerful about curiosity is that it's not difficult to develop. In fact, people are born curious. From the earliest age, we naturally explore our environments. Those who *stay* curious have greater success in school, the workplace, and leadership roles (von Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011; Reio & Wiswell, 2000; Strella & Martin, 2014). The more curious we are, the more likely we are to enjoy strong relationships and life happiness, not to mention actually living longer (Kashdan & Steger, 2007; Swan & Carmelli, 1996). Indeed, it seems if there's one gift we could provide students to ensure their success (and ours as a nation) in an uncertain future, it may well be to preserve their curiosity.

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Sadly, though, teachers, under pressure to cover content and prepare students for standardized tests, often quash motivation and curiosity in the classroom (Engel, 2011). That's the bad news. The good news is that the teaching practices that allow curiosity to flourish are already familiar to most teachers; they just need to be employed more intentionally. To create truly inside-out classrooms where learning is driven by students' inner desire to learn, rather than gold stars or grades, teachers need to understand and apply the science of intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and learning.

They need to understand, for example, how to use suspense and controversy to create an initial *spark* of interest in students. They need to know how to ask

better, higher-order questions in the classroom and encourage student self-talk in order to fan that spark into a *flame* of inquiry that supports deep learning. Perhaps most important, they need to help students fuel their own *fires* by giving them structured autonomy to explore their own interests and show them how to engage in reflective practice, so they learn how to continually ask themselves questions. We might view this entire process as something akin to a "gradual release of curiosity"—starting with teachers asking students questions, helping students question what they're learning, and finally, releasing them to ask their own questions. Most important, perhaps, the questions that drive curiosity are not simple, yes-or-no questions, but rather, complex questions that encourage higher-order thinking.

To be clear, teachers—and standards—still play a key role in inside-out classrooms. Students aren't allowed to run amuck, studying whatever they fancy, nor do teachers simply surround students with learning materials in hopes they'll teach themselves. Rather, standards serve as a platform on which teachers and students design learning opportunities—much like how software developers use the standardized programming language of Android and iPhone operating systems to create a plethora of apps. For example, instead of teaching standards in a top-down, one-size-fits all way (e.g., "Read chapter 3 and answer the questions in the back"), teachers use "big ideas" or "essential questions" (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013) (e.g., "Does history tell a story of progress or repetition?") that engage students in developing content knowledge *and* higher-order questioning.

Preparing principals to lead adaptive challenges

Creating classrooms where curiosity can flourish will be for many educators a fundamental shift in thinking about schooling and learning—similar to what Ron Heifetz and Don Laurie (1997) label an *adaptive challenge*—something where the way forward is not exactly clear; there's no script to follow. Tackling such challenges requires a different kind of school leadership, one that empowers staff to engage in innovation, experimentation, and "failing forward"—seeing failures as opportunities to learn and improve. Much like teachers who encourage student curiosity by asking good questions, principals guide school teams through adaptive challenges by asking questions that prompt professional self-reflection

and collaboration. In short, principals must also be curious and model the kinds of question-asking and solution-seeking behaviors they want to see among teachers and students.

For too long, though, we've expected principals to act as middle managers, ensuring fidelity of implementation of externally prescribed programs. Because curiosity is spontaneous and individualized, there's no paint-by-numbers program to follow. It requires *precision without prescription*. That is, teachers must help one another develop more precise teaching practices, becoming able to, like medical professionals, accurately diagnose student learning needs and respond with timely and proper treatment. For example, it isn't enough for teachers to know that they need to pace learning effectively to keep students engaged; they must develop a sharp understanding of how to chunk lessons and increase tempo as learning unfolds. Nor is it enough to know they must regularly assess student learning; they must also be able to give students the kind of regular feedback that allows them to track their own progress toward mastery. Helping teachers develop such precision requires principals to shift from being directive to empowering leaders, reflecting the African proverb: To go fast, go alone; to go far, go together.

Changing the paradigm of systems reform

In many ways, traditional approaches to systems reform have been relying on the "wrong drivers" (Fullan, 2011). Reformers hope to push initiatives from the top down, or the "outside in"—issuing policy from a central authority and expecting it to reach classrooms (see graphic on p. 5). Yet research and experience suggests that such approaches only work in the short term, delivering what David Hopkins, former education advisor to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, describes as a "short, sharp shock" that can jolt systems "out of complacency" and focus them on a few "measurable goals" (Hopkins, 2013, p. 9). Low-performing schools *can* benefit from top-down interventions—for example, adopting pre-packaged curricula, such as America's Choice, Success for All, or Core Knowledge, which encourage everyone to get on the same page (Chenoweth, 2007). However, within a few years of adopting such a curriculum, schools that keep improving begin *adapting* the curriculum to better suit their own needs, while retaining the core principles underlying their early success, such as having a consistent and aligned curriculum.
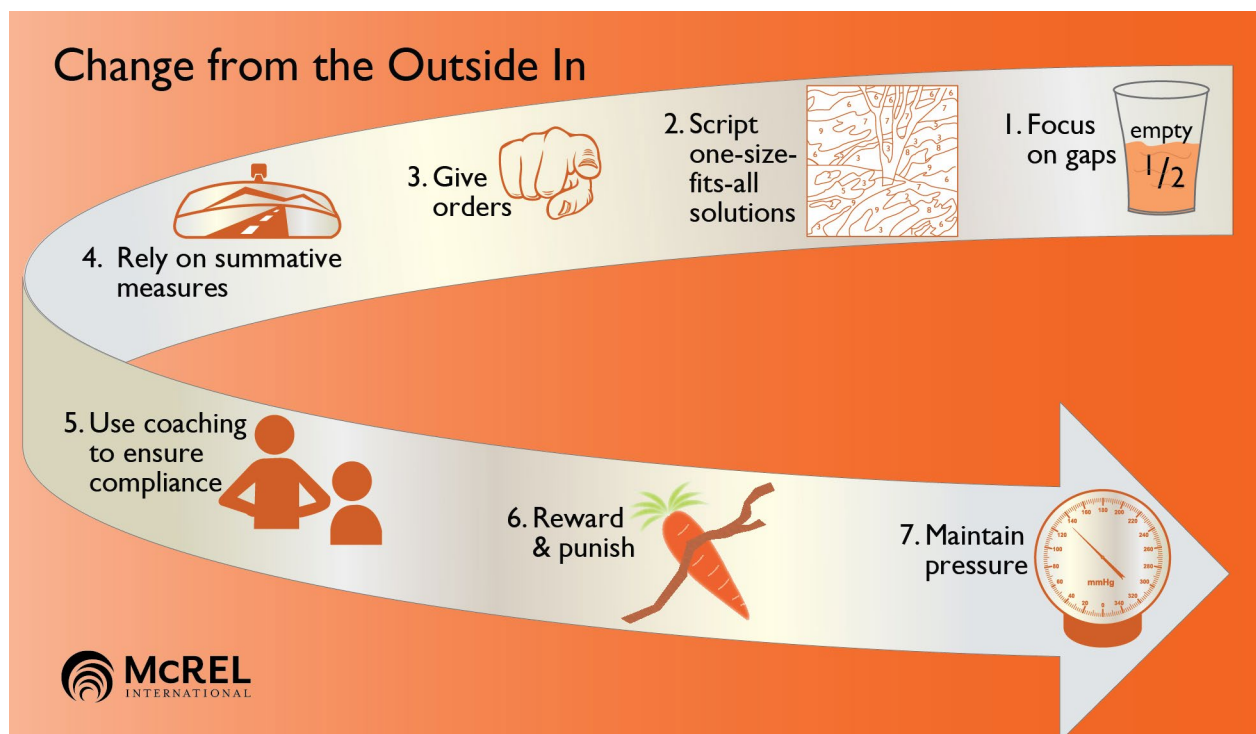
As a nation, our problem seems to be that we've kept at the same top-down approaches, which, according to Hopkins, "have a very limited half-life," with continued outside pressure becoming "oppressive, alienating, and counter-productive" (Hopkins, 2013, p. 9). Hopkins saw exactly that phenomenon unfold in the U.K., where the adoption of a nationwide reading program created some initial gains, but then hit a plateau because teachers were no longer improving their knowledge or skills, but simply following someone else's paint-by-numbers approach.

The all-too-familiar steps of the top-down or outside-in approach typically used in American schools include:

- **Starting with the glass half empty.** Outside-in approaches often begin with deficit thinking—identifying gaps and assuming that answers lie from outside the system.

- **Scripting one-size-fits all solutions**. External solutions often consist of paint-by-numbers approaches that we expect educators to *adopt* with so-called "fidelity of implementation," even though their context may be very different from the one in which the program was originally developed.

- **Giving orders.** The default leadership behavior with outside-in approaches, is to *force* people into adopting the paint-by-numbers approach by delivering edicts, often supported by because-I-told-you-so rationale.

Following so-called Theory X thinking, someone at the top of the system gives an order, principals (operating as middle managers) enforce the orders, and teachers are expected to dutifully follow them. There's little time—or latitude—for questioning or *adapting* approaches if they appear to be counterproductive.

- **Relying on summative measures.** Another common component of top-down reform is heavy reliance on high-stakes testing and other summative measures to drive performance. Often data come too late to do anything about them because the students being tested have already left the school or classroom in which they were tested.

- **Using coaching to ensure compliance.** Research shows that many administrators operate with a top-down behaviorist mindset and, as a result, tend to recast peer collaboration and coaching—which are designed to operate as inside-out mechanisms—as top-down approaches, turning teacher coaches into confederates of the central office tasked with ensuring proper compliance with the scripted program.

- **Employing extrinsic rewarding and punishments.** The default motivational tool is often carrots and sticks—sanctions for poor performance or rewards for good performance. Yet research on external rewards show that these extrinsic rewards tend to have diminishing returns over time.

Change from the Outside In

1. Focus on gaps
2. Script one-size-fits-all solutions
3. Give orders
4. Rely on summative measures
5. Use coaching to ensure compliance
6. Reward & punish
7. Maintain pressure

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- **Maintaining pressure.** Frustrated by these diminishing returns, administrators often feel the need to turn up the heat, so to speak, to get the gains they experienced from their initial dose of extrinsic motivators. Yet simply using facts, fear, and force—the essence of top-down approaches to reform—does little to change anyone's behavior. Moreover, a growing body of research shows creating *threat* conditions actually diminish performance (Bronson & Merryman, 2014).

The biggest problem with relying solely on external pressure is that school systems generally suffer from a chronic plague of poor implementation (Goodwin, 2011) and ineffective approaches to professional development (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Simply using fear, facts, and force—the essence of top-down approaches to reform— does little to change anyone's behavior (Deutschman, 2006). To wit: As we reported in *Balanced Leadership for Powerful Learning* (Goodwin, Cameron, & Hein, 2015), when cardiac bypass patients are told they must change their lifestyle or wind up back on the operating table (or worse, in the grave), 9 out of 10 are unable to do so (Deutschman, 2006). If *fear of death* isn't sufficient to motivate people to change, why should we think that browbeating, public shaming, or threatening loss of employment will prompt massive changes in teacher behavior?

A better approach to changing behavior lies in *reframing* a challenge—showing teachers what they'll gain (instead of give up) by doing something new and providing them with supportive relationships to help them develop and solidify better habits (Deutschman, 2006). Inside-out approaches to reform start with *why*—framing efforts around a moral purpose (e.g., encouraging student curiosity) that creates intrinsic buy-in. They also show groups of teachers that what's being asked of them is within their reach by, for example, using instructional rounds—a process modeled after the practice of medical students making rounds with more experienced doctors to observe patients and discuss treatment protocols (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Tietel, 2009)—to call out best teaching practices already being used. Moreover, no one is forced to use the better practices. Rather, small teams of teachers take charge of their own professional learning by working first on those proven and engaging practices (from among an established repertoire) that represent their biggest opportunities for growth. Working together, they engage in professional dialogue,
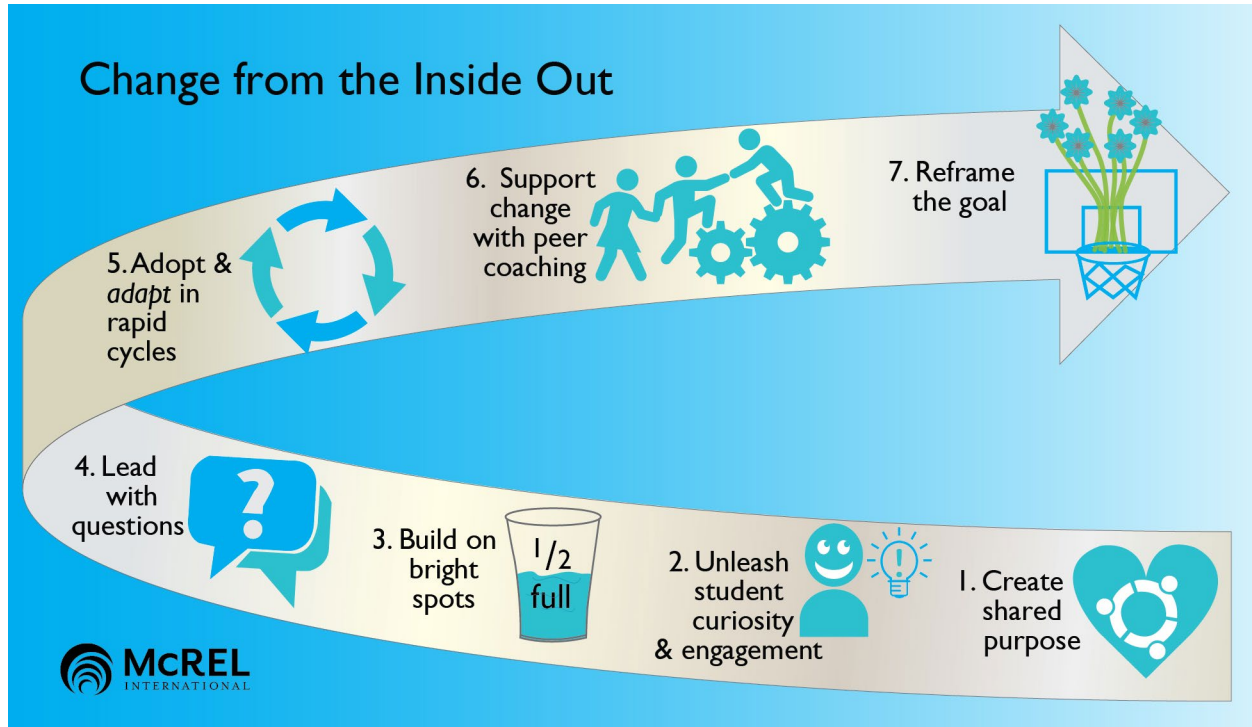
offering "critical friend" feedback to move one another along a continuum of mastery. Through short data-collection cycles, they monitor and adjust, ultimately developing greater *precision* with an entire repertoire of practices—all without prescription (Hopkins & Craig, 2011).

Getting from here to there: Taking an inside-out approach

Although there's no lock-step sequence for transforming an entire paradigm of reform, there seem to be a few key, consistent actions schools systems can take to approach reform from the inside out (see graphic on page 7).

1. **Develop shared understanding about the moral purpose of schooling.** System leaders should engage their communities, teachers, and elected officials in a collaborative dialogue that starts with *why* do our schools exist? In the crush of daily events, it's easy to lose sight of our purpose, yet maintaining clarity around shared goals is a key correlate of district success (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Moreover, research shows that believing in something important has a spillover effect into believing that change is possible (Duhigg, 2012).

2. **Put curiosity, engagement, and motivation at the center of schooling.** In recent years, we've put much of the burden of student success on teachers. However, student motivation has as much influence on student success as teacher performance (Marzano, 2000). That's not to say we should blame the victims or abdicate professional responsibility as educators, but rather, help teachers understand how to tap into students' natural curiosity to create motivated, lifelong learners. In short, "inside out" starts with students themselves—unleashing the curiosity and desire to learn that's already inside them.

3. **Build on bright spots and strengths.** Intrinsic motivation is also a powerful motivator for adults, yet we rarely consider it when developing teachers. Instead, we presume solutions must come from the outside in and feel we must coerce teachers into improving, rather than looking for, and amplifying, bright spots in their current practice and using performance appraisal to support (not sort) teachers, by helping them build on their strengths and chart a course of professional growth (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

Change from the Inside Out

5. Adopt & *adapt* in rapid cycles

6. Support change with peer coaching

7. Reframe the goal

4. Lead with questions

3. Build on bright spots

1/2 full

2. Unleash student curiosity & engagement

1. Create shared purpose

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4. **Develop leaders as change agents and questioners.** Two decades ago, we recognized that principals could no longer operate solely as building managers; they needed to be instructional leaders, too. The complex, adaptive challenges schools now face require principals to share responsibility for instructional leadership and operate as change agents. That requires a new way of thinking and new skill sets for school leaders, who must become adept at not simply giving orders, but asking powerful questions that dig deeply into problems to and reframe challenges to surface new solutions.

5. **Fail forward with rapid-cycle improvement.** Data is the lifeblood of school systems; we cannot improve without it. Yet when we apply high stakes to data, we tend to hide rather than learn from our mistakes, which stifles innovation. To create the kind of learning environments that are needed to allow student curiosity to flourish, schools should borrow a page from Silicon Valley, where the secret to success is learning by doing—continually testing and improving products in rapid cycles. Schools can do the same by allowing teachers to co-develop new approaches to learning and then testing and improving them based on the data they collect—and mistakes they find.

6. **Re-discover peer coaching.** Although we've long known that the key to professional learning lies in combining theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and peer coaching (Joyce & Showers, 2002), we often overlook the power of peer coaching. Worse, we may turn peer coaching into top-down monitoring and compliance (Spillane, 2000). Its real power, though, lies in peers offering "critical friend" feedback to help one another move toward mastery (Joyce, Hopkins, & Calhoun, 2014).

7. **Reframe the goal.** What we measure is what we get. So if all we measure is student performance on standardized achievement tests, we'll continue to drive uninspired, low-level teaching and learning. Large-scale tests can be useful for comparative purposes, so we don't need to get rid of them altogether; rather, we should re-balance testing every student every year with a sampling method, using the savings in time and resources to focus on performance assessments, which can be used on a large scale for accountability purposes (Hofman, Goodwin, & Kahl, 2015).

It's already being done

In the end, what's most important about inside-out approaches is that they work. In the diverse and impoverished suburbs of northern Melbourne, Australia, a large-scale reform effort that focused on curiosity and inside-out practices improved achievement in previously failing schools. Unleashing the power of student curiosity, however, required monumental changes to not only practice but how to think about practice—including a new sense of moral purpose, new types of teaching, new types of school leadership, new approaches to professional learning, and system leaders who understood that an inside-out approach to reform was the best path forward (Hopkins & Craig, 2011).

As teachers' practices became more precise, achievement also began to rise across the spectrum. Over a three-year period, the percentages of students scoring in the bottom two (of six) achievement bands on the Australian national test (called the NAPLAN) shrank from 18.5% to 15.9% as the percentages in the top two rose from 30.3% to 39.0% (Hopkins, 2011). These are, in fact, significant changes for a large system with a prior history of chronic low performance. Moreover, at the scale of a 75,000-student region, they represent roughly 3,000 fewer students demonstrating inadequate performance and 7,000 more students demonstrating performance that's on track for post-secondary success in just a three-year span. In short, the effort raised both the *floor* and the *ceiling* of student performance, positively changing the academic lives of some 10,000 students—enough to fill a collegiate basketball arena.

The entire effort in Melbourne has run counter to the Global Education Reform Movement, or G.E.R.M.—a term cleverly dubbed by Pasi Sahlberg (2012), architect of Finland's reform efforts, for the kinds of top-down approaches to reform that have spread, virus-like, through the education systems worldwide. Melbourne's unconventional effort—which focused on improving student literacy, numeracy, *and curiosity*—resulted in teachers across the region reporting higher levels of student motivation and students showing steady gains in engagement *and* learning on standardized achievement tests. More important, students themselves reported a renewed sense of well-being and engagement in learning (Fraser, Glover, & Craig, 2011).

A bridge too far?

Some may think that curiosity and inside-out approaches sound promising but are perhaps naïve. Can they really restore opportunities for *all* students, for example, those who face the stress, uncertainty, and unequal opportunities associated with grinding poverty and language barriers? We might consider, though, what top-down approaches have done to solve these problems. Test-based accountability approaches like No Child Left Behind appear to have done little to actually improve instruction or achievement—an analysis of trend data in 25 states found that achievement gaps were actually closing at a faster rate prior to the implementation of the law (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Worse, test-based accountability appears to have prompted many schools to narrow curricula and ignore skills that students may most need to be successful in life (Murnane & Papay, 2010).

Moreover, a top-down focus on closing achievement gaps has been translated in many places into deficit thinking about low-income and minority students—that they just need to sit up straight, act deferential, and obey the rules—preparation that seems better suited for following orders in low-wage jobs than engaging in problem-solving or creative thinking for the kinds of professions that are likely to dominate the 21st century (Pink, 2005). This includes skilled-labor professions, like plumbers, who do more than simply follow directions, but actually fix problems, like leaky pipes.

Finally, let's be clear: Good teachers are essential, but they alone cannot overcome the challenges of poverty (Rothstein, 2010). Lifting students from poverty requires a variety of supports, including effective early childhood education, school climates that promote academic success, positive peer pressure, and family supports (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Perhaps the biggest promise of pivoting away from top-down approaches may be allowing school systems to redirect some of their energies from monitoring and compliance tasks to building teacher capacity and providing supports for students and families (Honig, 2013).

Why not?

As human beings, we enter the world asking questions. People who change the world never stop asking them. It's time that we as educators ask an important question: After more than a quarter century of reliance on top-down, test-driven accountability as the primary driver of reform, are we ready to take a road less traveled—one that starts with student curiosity and builds, inside-out, from there? Or maybe the real question is this one: Why *not* start with student curiosity and engagement? Are we so convinced that our current approach is worth continuing? Or have we reached the proverbial definition of insanity—trying the same thing, yet expecting different results? Is now the time, as never before, for something new, something that could make everything else we're trying to do a lot easier ... and more joyful?

The past three decades of reform haven't been all bad. They have focused our attention on once-neglected subgroups and on using data for improvement. Those are important advancements that we don't want to throw out with the bathwater, so to speak. Yet parents, students, and educators recognize the problems with continuing to double down on all aspects of the current approach.

Many appear to want something different—consider, for example, that Sir Ken Robinson's talk on the need to change our paradigm in education has received more than 13 million views on YouTube (Robinson, 2010) and that 20 percent of the students in New York recently opted out of that state's assessment (Harris, 2015). Certainly, it's easy for educators today to feel constrained by federal mandates, state regulations, and local board decisions. Years of test-driven accountability may have

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left many educators in a state of learned helplessness, so focused on avoiding the threat of sanctions or moving "bubble kids" from one performance band to the next that they've lost sight of what really matters or lost the courage to try something new.

Loosening the bonds

We've probably all heard about "baby elephant syndrome"—a reference to elephant trainers chaining baby elephants to a stake and keeping them chained so that even as they grow large and strong enough to pull the stake from the ground, their conditioning keeps them dutifully restrained. Perhaps as educators, we suffer from the same affliction. We loathe the constraints of our current reform paradigm, yet underestimate our power to walk away from it, experiencing the freedom of a new, more engaging system of schooling.

In ways small and large, we can push back against this current approach to reform and, in doing so, we might be surprised by the results. Consider University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, where educators have engaged in what might seem like an act of civil disobedience: They've eschewed test preparation (and often grades) altogether and are focusing instead on asking students "questions to spark their curiosity" and think deeply about their learning. The result? Fully *99 percent* of the school's low-income student population, who enter the school in 7th and 8th grade two years behind on average, are passing the state test in 11th grade (Steiny, 2012).

What started as a small movement is growing. District and state leaders from Texas (Weiss, 2014) to New York (Strauss, 2015) are beginning to push back against nonsensical policies. Cracks in the current top-down system of reform are beginning to show—in local school board meetings, statehouses, and the nation's capital. There's great, untapped strength in the disaffection among students, parents, teachers, and voters about the current path of education reform. A new path awaits us. What began as a few people asking questions in faculty lounges, school parking lots, and weblogs, has grown. It's no longer a baby elephant. It's time we pulled the stake from the ground. ⬡

About the Author

Bryan Goodwin, President & CEO of McREL International
Bryan thrives on translating research into practice, scanning the world for new insights and best practices on teaching and leading, and helping educators everywhere adapt them to address their own challenges. A frequent conference presenter, he is the author of *Simply Better: Doing What Matters Most to Change the Odds for Student Success*, and co-author of *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching* and *Balanced Leadership for Powerful Learning: Tools for Achieving Success in Your School*. Before joining McREL in 1998, Bryan was a college instructor, a high school teacher, and an award-winning business journalist.

About McREL

McREL International is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to improving education outcomes for all students through applied research, product development, and professional service to teachers and education leaders. We collaborate with schools and school systems across the country and worldwide to help educators think differently about their challenges, offering research-based solutions and guidance that help students flourish.

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