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Foreword

In my dictionary, *breakthrough* is defined as

> a sudden, dramatic and important discovery or development . . . [and/or] a significant . . . overcoming of a perceived obstacle, allowing the completion of a process.

The authors of this book describe a path, a process, a model that they think will take large educational systems from their current state of effortful but only marginally successful improvements to a completely different state, a high-functioning and powerful transformation unlike anything we have previously experienced. More than once, they use the term *tipping point* to describe this transformation. In social dynamics, tipping points are preceded by increased or pent-up capacity and demand, which seems incremental as it develops but builds to a point where it changes discontinuously to a completely different state.

My own work for the past 30 years or so has been shaped by the mantra, "steady work." This phrase comes from an ancient Jewish folk tale, captured by the essayist Irving Howe (1969; see also Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988) in which a villager is given the assignment of sitting outside the village gate to warn his fellow citizens of the arrival of the Messiah. After many decades, one of the villagers asks him why he continues to do this job. He replies, "The pay is meager, but the work is steady." My work has led me to an increasing appreciation of the power and resilience of the default culture of public schools—the deeply rooted beliefs, structures, artifacts, and symbols of an increasingly dysfunctional and obsolete set of institutions. Breakthroughs and tipping points are not the most appropriate metaphors in this world. Something like a large, thick rubber band might be more apt. The default culture stretches, seemingly to a breaking (tipping) point, and then it snaps back to where it was. The

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best ideas of reformers have, as yet, proven no match for the inertia of a powerful resident culture. I am increasingly convinced that the work of reform is not about "changing" the institutions and practices of schools but about deliberately displacing one culture with another—work not unlike moving graveyards. More deliberate and steady than discontinuous.

The advent of accountability has significantly juiced up the rhetoric of school reform. Easily available data on student performance have provided the fuel that reformers need to generate, at least rhetorically, a white-hot sense of urgency around school improvement. Those of us who work with schools on a regular basis—including the authors of this book—have unprecedented access to information about schools and their students to use it to bring this sense of urgency into the world of practice. In addition, the presence of systemic data has allowed us to identify exceptional schools, ones that seem to defy the default culture, and to use those exceptions to frame a vision of how schools might work in dramatically different ways. A sense of urgency, combined with some existence proofs, can convince one that *all* schools can do what a few schools have done. But, of course, a deep-seated feature of the default culture is that it has always allowed exceptional schools to exist, often in much larger proportions than at present, and these schools have never exercised a systemic influence (Elmore, 2004). In fact, one of the primary ways public education has legitimized itself is to point to these exceptions as evidence of the roiling activity of reform that will one day transform the entire system.

So *Breakthrough* is a deliberately contrarian book. It stakes out a view of school improvement that is at odds with much previous research and that paints a more optimistic view of the prospects for large-scale improvement than most earlier works. In this sense, it is an antidote to the work of others, mine included, that take a more skeptical view. Readers of this book, however, should be aware that they are entering a century-long debate over the conditions of success and failure in public schools, and they are preparing themselves to work on a century-old, deeply rooted set of cultural norms, practices, structures, and institutions. Whether you accept the authors' premise of discontinuous breakthroughs and tipping points or your working theory more closely resembles steady work, the forces that will determine your success will be the same. Know them well.

The authors give us a bold model, a model that captures the main elements of what advanced researchers and practitioners of school improvement have learned from studying exemplary schools over the past decade or so. The model joins the imperative of attention to the individual learning of students and educators to the conditions of the environment in which their work occurs. It connects a working theory of instructional practice with a working theory of the institutional conditions that will support that practice and the leadership skills and knowledge that will sustain it. There are several powerful ideas at the center of this model, among them the idea that instructional practice can meet a standard of precision without undermining its power or flexibility, the idea that learning must at the same time be personalized and generalized, the idea that formative assessment can be used to plot an improvement path at the individual and collective levels, and the idea that systems must reflect and respond in a timely way to the actual instructional decisions that teachers make. The authors are also careful to demonstrate that the overall design of their model is predicated on practices that are already in use, in a less systemic way, in many places. In fact, their argument that a breakthrough is imminent stems from the belief that several streams of practice are converging on a common target of opportunity created by the pressure of accountability for student performance.

Practitioners will, no doubt, find this book both a powerful guide to the work of school improvement and, perhaps more important, a source of constructive puzzlement. The authors make excellent use of research on primary school literacy practice to illustrate how robust theories of learning at the individual level can be generalized to the group, organization, and system levels. Literacy, however, is one subject among many, primary grade practices are much better developed than practices at other levels, and the problems of student learning and instructional practice, not to mention the development of teachers' knowledge and skill, vary substantially by content area and grade level. What this suggests is that, in addition to being a guide to practice, this book is also an invitation to practitioners to participate in a longer-term conversation—an extension and expansion of the book's general principles into other content areas, other age and grade levels, and other institutional settings. No doubt the authors' own ideas and practices will be informed over the

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longer term, as they have in the past, by their engagement in this conversation. The authors are, in this sense, courageous for bringing these ideas forward for use, debate, criticism, and revision. This book will be both a guide and provocation for future work on the critical questions of school improvement.

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