

PREFACE

“What’s all this fuss about a school improvement plan? Let’s just complete the forms and get back to teaching our kids.”

“We don’t have time to rehash what we are doing. Our school is orderly and calm; our classrooms are busy, and students who work hard do well; that’s all that really matters.”

SOUND FAMILIAR?

This is the conversation of a faculty that has not yet experienced the energizing and empowering effects of a school that is organized to make learning contagious. Faced with the frustrations and challenges of modern schooling, this faculty defends the status quo. Thus, opportunities to positively influence each other and their students go begging.

If you recognize the limitations of this type of thinking or you want to know what you can do to empower yourself and others to create enthusiasm and energy for progress, this book is for you. Not intended as a theoretical review of the literature on school change, *Learning Places* is a field guide, a tool for focusing attention on the kinds of choices that schools must make if they are to create places of learning. As such, *Learning Places* is a book of questions that good schools ask themselves, a book of challenging opportunities for uncovering the best in a school with the intention of making it better, a book designed to advance the progress of any school that has the courage to look deeply at what it does. It is our belief that the intangibles of change that make future development more likely are created in those moments when a school faculty looks deeply at what it does on a daily basis.

LEARNING PLACES

*Success conforms to
the way we pursue it.*

Today we know that schools are living entities that grow and develop holistically. We also know that when it comes to teaching young people, little things are often big things. As the current literature on school change confirms, student success is more likely in schools that unify every aspect of the school around supportive, schoolwide practices that emphasize learning. These schoolwide practices are the context of a school. They include everything from the bell schedules to how people treat each other on a daily basis. Contexts are not things we study; they are what we do. They range from daily routines to how schools solve their problems. And they are well within any school's power to change.

Drawing attention to the context of the school, the actual practices through which learning “takes place,” helps people uncover new possibilities for improvement. For example, providing student mentors for students who are having difficulty is a recommended contextual element of an effective school program. Having discovered that successful schools offer this type of support to students, a school that does not is faced with a dilemma. It might solve the dilemma by deciding that other programs are more suitable for students or by resolving that study halls would benefit more students; making these choices is a critical component of the improvement process.

We chose the title *Learning Places* because all schools are places. They are concrete and now. Some schools, however, are more than places—they are learning places; they are organized to infuse learning in every nook and cranny of the school. They pay attention to what they do. By grappling with the elements of the school that focus attention on learning, these schools generate the social cohesion that makes future development more likely.

Each chapter in *Learning Places* represents a plan for moving from collective empowerment to action. Chapter 1 establishes the framework of *Learning Places* and the orientation for using the guide as a tool for change. Successive chapters delve into the substance of the journey by helping readers to recognize and shape the important academic, physical, and social contexts of the school (chapters 2, 3, 4, 5); to better incorporate and share mindful classroom practices (chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10); and to sustain passion and commitment through professional development (chapters 11, 12).

There are lots to do, so we have a powerful practical message: start with any chapter that you can use to energize your present improvement initiatives and branch out to others as you progress. Don't worry about doing everything at once. Start small, think big. Don't wait for the system to get its act together. Lead by example.