

Prologue

“We need to ‘decomplexify’ this for educators.”

A senior official at the U.S. Department of Education said this about her desire to make sensible policies for teachers. While I appreciated her sentiment, I could not miss the irony of the fact that in trying to communicate this notion in her own bureaucratic way, she chose the word *decomplexify*—a word that does not exist in standard dictionaries.

She could have just said *simplify*.

Teachers and administrators do not need bureaucrats to complicate their work with terms like *decomplexify*. Now more than ever, we need elegant solutions that address the complexity of the world in ways that do not overwhelm us. So many conversations begin, “There are no silver bullets, but . . .” What if there is a silver bullet? We can create silver bullets—but every mold has to look a little different because each student we serve is uniquely gifted with skills, experiences, and opportunities. In other words, we don’t serve *all* students; we serve *each* student.

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This book is grounded in decades of research and experiences that demonstrate that there has never been a better time to be in education. We know more about how people learn, have more tools to support that learning, and have more vehicles for educational delivery than at any point in the history of the world.

Teaching is the profession that makes all others possible, but sometimes we make it overly complicated.

We need to stop performing, entertaining, judging, stressing, enabling, and dictating.

We need to become better learners—better listeners, readers, coaches, and truth tellers.

To become better learners as educators and students, we need three things: feedback, engagement, and well-being. At its essence, learning is contingent upon these three components that conveniently form the acronym FEW. In times of complexity, we need to focus on a few ideas. Each student deserves educators who support their learning in these three ways.

The title of the book, *Just Teaching*, has two purposes. First, teaching should not be overwhelming. Teaching is the most life-giving work that we do because it is essential for developing thriving human beings. Together, we will break down what is essential and can become more life-giving. We do not have to respond to feeling overwhelmed by working even harder. Second, I am devastated when I hear teachers refer to themselves as “just teachers,” as if they are powerless and have no status. What if we could turn the meaning of that phrase upside-down and claim its redemptive power? “Just teachers” care for each student. Teachers who are just cultivate freedom and flourishing. “Just teaching” clarifies and elevates the essential work we do as educators.

The solution is for *each* student. To get to the solution, we have to stop thinking about *all* students as if students are faceless components of an amorphous blob. We must move past thinking in subgroups, categories, stereotypes, and caricatures. We need to see, hear, love, and respect each student.

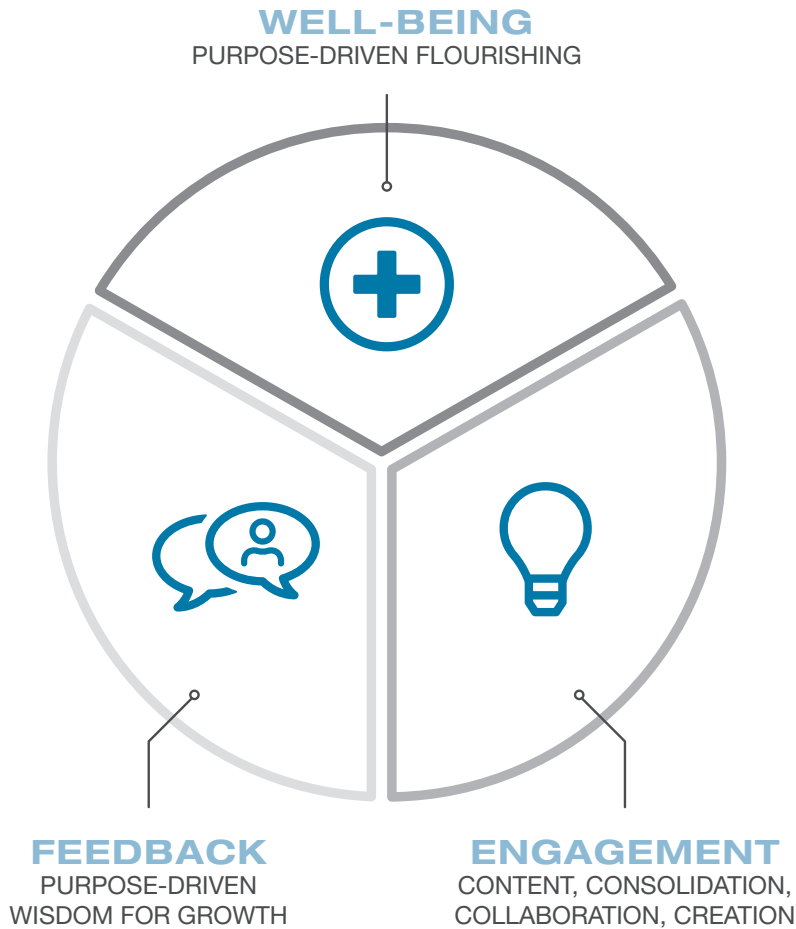
Well-being, Engagement, and Feedback

To fully address the FEW ideas in the book, we have to reverse the acronym. We cannot get to feedback without first attending to well-being. Well-being can be part of a virtuous or vicious cycle. The virtuous cycle looks like this: If administrators are physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually well, then they can serve teachers effectively. If teachers are well, they can serve students well. If students are well, they flourish, and the school flourishes and supports the well-being of the community. Unfortunately, much of what we have seen in recent years has looked like the opposite of this, which is a vicious cycle.

Well-being is the foundation on which we build learning. Meaningful learning does not occur when a student is in a trauma-induced state of fight, flight, freeze, or appease. If the amygdala senses danger, those are the four options it gives students. This has always been true, but it

FIGURE 0.1 Just Teaching “Decomplexified”

FEEDBACK, ENGAGEMENT, & WELL-BEING



becomes abundantly clear in times of significant disruption. The pandemic thrust most students and educators worldwide into completely new territory that was isolating and exhausting. If well-being is not supported, then we never get to meaningful engagement or assessment and feedback on student work.

Engagement has been missing as well. During significant disruptions caused by pandemics or natural disasters, many students cannot access online resources due to insufficient hardware, software, or instruction. That makes engagement impossible. Lack of engagement can be more

subtle and insidious as well. As students have been forced to increasingly embrace screens, software engineers are constantly competing for their attention while students try to do their homework. This is a rigged game with billions of dollars pouring into the attention economy that is rapidly reducing students' cognitive endurance.

Feedback flows from meaningful engagement because engagement should lead to deliberate practice. Deliberate practice requires feedback from others for improvement. This should be the objective for all educators because it is how we create lifelong learners. We come alongside students to help them become the best, most complete versions of themselves. We do that by providing scaffolding and challenging learning experiences that we assess with clear-eyed honesty and provide feedback on how students can improve. We also need feedback for ourselves as educators because feedback is the cornerstone of deliberate practice. The FEW ideas described here are not linear but should reinforce each other. In other words, feedback should enhance engagement and support well-being so that continuous improvement occurs.

Who Should Use This Book?

Don't simply read this book. Use this book. Although I wrote this book with aspiring and practicing classroom teachers in mind, administrators, policymakers, and parents may find this book useful to develop solutions that work for each student. This book is only about three things. If you are looking for simple, direct approaches to finding solutions to complex issues in education, this book is for you. In a world of ever-changing priorities, conditions, and strategies, you can use this book to return to the basics of what works for students. This book will simplify your approach to education in a way that will unleash your power for creative problem solving.

Instead of merely unleashing your own creativity, use this with a team. If we do this creative work in teams of teachers, administrators, and parents, we can show policymakers how to solve seemingly intractable problems such as apathy, distraction, underachievement, inequity, and lack of purpose. A single teacher cannot do this work alone. We need administrators and teachers to lead this work together in partnership with the families and communities they serve.

How Will This Book Help Us Develop Solutions?

This book is divided into four parts. Chapter 1 and Chapter 8 focus on each student and each educator. Focusing on each student makes teaching infinitely interesting and brings meaning to what we do. Given the tyranny of the urgency that educators face every day, each chapter will begin with key takeaways. This could help in three ways. First, by reading these boxes, you could “read” this entire book in about eight minutes. Obviously, you will miss a lot of nuance and practical application, but you will have a sense of the book. Second, you can use these boxes to identify areas of the chapter where you want to focus your time, as the boxes follow the order of the chapters. Third, you could use the boxes to review key ideas when you revisit a chapter after an initial read. Regardless of how you use these boxes or this book, I hope they are helpful.

At the end of each chapter, you will find one tool that will be a component of a solution to develop thriving students. The point of the tool is for you to do the hard work (preferably with others) of moving toward solutions—not talking about a possibility, considering an improvement, or perseverating on what a solution might be. At the end of each chapter, you will start doing the work. In the final chapter, you will bring all the tools together. You can also download each tool as fillable PDFs from the website (<http://justschools.net>) if you would prefer to use them that way.

Sandwiched between Chapters 1 and 8 will be Part I. Well-being, Part II. Engagement, and Part III. Feedback. Part I addresses how we connect with other human beings by focusing on their basic needs first. Simple strategies rooted in complex truths about students and educators animate this section. Part II tackles the four Cs of student engagement: content, consolidation, collaboration, and creation. Specifically, teachers look at themselves and move beyond content presentation to deeper levels of engagement through a laser focus on each student. Part III explores feedback based on authentic assessments and performance tasks. In this section, assessment becomes a celebration of learning, and feedback is life-giving for the giver and receiver.

If you are interested in the most effective ways to serve each student based on the best research on how students learn and the wisdom of thousands of educators with the best tools available in a way that focuses what we do as educators, let’s go. By the end of this book, you will be “just teaching” in the best sense of the phrase.

