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# Preface

The lack of serious attention to school culture has stymied efforts to improve schools. While the past 40 years of research have prompted a huge shift in what we know about successful teaching and learning and despite decades of school reform to advance all students' achievement, little improvement is evident. Many reform efforts fail because they do not consider school culture or respect its capacity to derail even well-intentioned efforts. Until teachers and principals can recognize and modify those aspects of their school's culture that inhibit positive change, all their good intentions and innovations will be no more than seasonal window dressing.

The good news is that purposeful educators can shape their school's culture. "Culture is organic to its community; if the culture changes, everything changes."<sup>1</sup> School culture is not static. Rather, it is constantly being assembled and shaped through interactions with others and by reflections on life and the world in general.

In order to reinvigorate their school cultures in ways that better support teaching and learning, school leaders must re-boot. Similar to restarting a computer or other electronic device because the applications are not responding, school leaders must consciously design ways to assess current practices and start over, that is, *re-boot*, with new ideas and approaches that promise to deliver better results.

## WHAT IS SCHOOL CULTURE RE-BOOT?

Typically implicit and operating outside conscious awareness, school culture is the general feel people get when they walk through a school's halls. It is the unwritten rules that guide how people think, feel, and act in the organization. Culture influences every aspect of schools, including staff

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<sup>1</sup>Donahoe, T. (1993). Finding the way: Structure, time, and culture in school improvement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(4), 298–305 (p. 302).

wardrobe, what staff discuss in the teachers' lounge, how teachers decorate their classrooms, their emphasis on certain curricular topics, their willingness to change, and their confidence in their collective abilities to achieve their goals. School culture determines how principals and teachers relate to each other and how educators relate to students and their parents. Their interactions shape and reinforce the culture in a self-perpetuating cycle. By influencing attitudes and behaviors, school culture influences how well teachers teach and how much students learn. Because all school cultures are highly resistant to change, they may present either barriers or bridges to long-lasting school improvement.

Why *culture re-boot*? To *re-boot* is to restart a computer or other electronic device because the applications are not responding. *Re-boot* has the connotation of starting over.

While school cultures are not computers, they do have unwritten norms and ways of behaving that resemble computer software. Sophisticated software makes the computer operate as we expect, although we do not see the actual lines of code that direct its behavior.

Applied to media dealing with serial fiction, such as comic book or TV series, *re-boot* means to step aside from the previous series and start anew with fresh ideas. In film, *re-boot* means to revamp and reinvigorate an existing franchise.

Just as *re-boot* suggests a restart or reset to improve performance outcomes, to *re-boot schools* means rethinking, redesigning, and enacting new practices in leadership, teaching, ethics, and relationships. It means readjusting the student learning environment, working with parents and community in ways that reshape the school culture, and restarting a cycle of positive dynamics that result in improved student outcomes.

*Re-boot*—with the hyphen—is emphatic. The more uncommonly spelled *re-boot* graphically stresses the deliberate growing together that comes not only from linking the prefix *re-* to the noun *boot* but also from refocusing a school's leadership and staff on challenging and replacing their familiar cultural assumptions and ways of doing business with those more conducive to student achievement and teacher satisfaction.

*Culture Re-Boot: Reinvigorating School Culture to Improve Student Outcomes* is written to help principals and teachers understand their school's culture and enact specific strategies to shape it in ways that promote greater teacher efficacy and student learning. Using a practitioner-friendly and constructivist approach, this book presents best practices in school improvement supported by professional literature while focusing readers on generating personal meaning, shared reflection, and deliberate applications of content to their own work settings. Meant to be read, discussed, and applied individually or in small groups, *Culture Re-Boot* builds what Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves call "the professional

capital”<sup>2</sup>—human, social, and decisional—to make meaningful and sustainable school improvements.

The authors and intended readers share many common goals that this book can promote:

- A user-friendly resource that educators will find readable, interesting, practical, relevant, and scholarly
- A way to work smarter, not harder
- Insight into how school culture impacts school norms, expectations, and behaviors
- Helping school leaders drive cultural change
- Knowing how schools can learn and the varied ways school leaders and teachers can shape school culture to enhance student learning and teacher satisfaction
- Developing professional capacity for shared influence and teachers’ instructional and leadership growth
- Ways to establish a student-centered learning culture throughout the school and in every classroom
- Strategies for promoting strong parent–community ties to improve teaching and learning
- A practitioner’s orientation from authors with 50 years of combined, successful K–12 school improvement leadership
- Best practices for school improvement supported by professional literature
- Ongoing opportunities for readers to make the content relevant and personally meaningful as they generate shared beliefs with colleagues to improve teaching and learning in their schools
- Many occasions to apply theory to practice, generating deeper understanding, and developing plans for shaping school culture for sustainable school improvement

## **FEATURES OF *CULTURE RE-BOOT: REINVIGORATING SCHOOL CULTURE TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES***

This book offers special features to help principals and teachers learn and apply the content of each chapter.

- *Anchored in reality.* Each chapter’s content and activities are written in keep-it-real language, a practical tone, and a pragmatic grounding of theory, leading to doable practice, by two former K–12 school improvement leaders.

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<sup>2</sup>Fullan, M., & Hargreaves, A. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- *Focused, readable, practitioner-oriented chapters.* The content emphasizes key aspects of school culture that impact leading, teaching, and learning and incorporates the best scholarship on these topics into clear and useful tools for school leaders.
- *Re-boot activities.* Located immediately following major concepts in each chapter, these reflective and practical exercises help you make relevant connections between the content and your own school, build personal meaning from the ideas just discussed, strengthen collegiality, and begin applying re-boot ideas to your own setting.
- *Questions and surveys.* Use these to identify and assess school culture and plan for improvement.
- *A road map and planning calendar.* The final chapter includes a detailed road map of how to pull all the chapters together to implement culture re-boot into your school with a planning calendar for Years 1 through 5.
- *Optional activities.* The book includes suggestions for additional activities to improve school culture by working with teachers, students, and parents and suggests possible no-cost, highly valid, and reliable resources to use for conducting teacher surveys.

## WORKING WITHIN A SCHOOL DISTRICT

Although we focus on re-booting the individual school, we recognize that schools are not orphans. Rather, they are part of a system. Schools are organized into school districts headed by superintendents and school boards. Typically, principals need their superintendent's awareness and prior approval before initiating any substantial changes in their schools. And, successful re-boot leads to substantial changes.

Superintendents who are aware that the school's improvement process will include a re-boot and who buy into this approach can offer the moral, material, and political support essential to helping the re-boot succeed. Onboard superintendents may want to view the re-booting school as a pilot site that offers local leadership and a model for innovative school improvement. Or, they may want to invite all schools at that level (elementary, middle, or high) to participate voluntarily in a common *Culture Re-Boot* training linked with individual school implementation and professional development. In this way, each principal and his or her leadership team would learn and experience the re-boot process together along with their district peers, but they would conduct all the re-boot activities as a school team and lead the professional development activities within their individual schools.

In a winning scenario, the superintendent actively supports the culture re-boot process and the changes it brings, and school leaders construct their own support networks among district peer re-boot leaders who can understand their work and help them resolve issues that may arise during re-boot implementation. The result is positive, systemic, and sustainable change that leads to improved student outcomes.

Principals and school leaders who wish to re-boot their schools know best which approach will work in their particular settings. We encourage them to think through the organizational and system implications of re-boot as they begin planning.

## **A WORD ABOUT FACILITATING RE-BOOT ACTIVITIES**

Rather than use case studies, vignettes, or stories to demonstrate our points, we make frequent use of re-boot activities to apply the learning to your own school and students. In this way, we help teachers and principals generate personal meaning, relevance, and critical conversations by investing the concepts into their own work settings. “We, here, and now” creates much more powerful learning than does “Them, there, and then.”

Because re-boot activities address educators’ own beliefs, assumptions, and practices, they invite cognitive and emotional responses. These may generate strong affect among the leadership team members. Finding personal meaning often prompts an emotional connection; this is a good thing. Such powerful activities, however, require a greater expertise in group facilitation—skill and comfort working with colleagues’ thoughts and feelings—than most principals have trained for.

To this end, it might be advisable to invite the school district’s staff development expert, the school district’s director of counseling and guidance, or the school counselor to lead—or colead—the school’s re-boot leadership activities. A skilled facilitator who can help members accurately reflect and express their thoughts and feelings and keep the group working constructively brings several benefits. First, using the principal as a team member rather than as its leader in re-boot activities may reduce teachers’ fears about speaking their minds. Likewise, a skilled facilitator engages teachers’ thoughts and feelings more directly in effective clarification, problem identification, and problem solving rather than allow partially formed ideas and unclear feelings to remain volatile, unanchored, and open to possibly undermining group progress and collegiality.

## CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

The book is organized into the following parts. Each chapter contains a discussion of the chapter's topic and several re-boot activities that principals can use with their leadership teams, teachers, students, and parents to better understand—and begin re-booting—their own school settings.

**Chapter 1: School Culture and Change as Learning** defines *school culture* and *school culture re-boot* and describes how they affect leading, teaching, and learning. We explain how school culture re-boot is able to do what 40 years of externally imposed school reforms could not: allow school leaders to deliberately shape school culture for improved student outcomes. We identify ways that school cultures shape organizations, how school cultures develop, the levels of school culture, the components of positive school cultures, change as organizational learning, and the characteristics of organizations that can learn. The chapter also discusses three mental models (the three-step change model, single- and double-loop learning, and multiple frames model) that boost organizational learning. Re-boot activities help school leaders develop their school's cultural profile and assess themselves as a learning organization, so they can determine what is working well and what needs to be rethought and re-booted. We also cite research supporting the impacts of school culture on improved teaching, learning, and student outcomes.

**Chapter 2: School Leadership as Culture Building** discusses the principal's role in shaping school culture. Main topics include leadership as culture building; how principals can transform their schools; understanding the dynamics, resources, and obstacles for culture re-boot; and how principals can prepare cognitively and emotionally for the re-boot process. We highlight the overlaps between leadership and management, evidence on the principal's role in increasing student achievement, and principal's five key leadership responsibilities that lead to improved student learning. And, we discuss how a principal can establish a schoolwide vision for the success of all students, create a safe environment for learning, and build a school leadership team for the re-boot process in how-to-do-it detail. The chapter also depicts the school culture re-boot concept and process graphically and verbally. Re-boot activities include developing symbols, images, and key words that can support a school vision and creating a school touchstone that links the school's core values to its daily practices and goals.

**Chapter 3: School Culture, Ethical Behavior, and Relational Trust** describes education as an ethical endeavor that depends on relationships. Topics include the importance of relational trust, cooperation, and responsibility in a positive school culture and supporting research linking relational trust and school performance. Principals and teacher leaders

consider the ways and extent to which their schools are fulfilling their moral dimensions, consider examples of behaviors that build—or discourage—relational trust, and assess their schools' cultures on trust-promoting behaviors. Team members also generate feedback for each other on how well each individual is communicating the varied aspects of trust and reflect on incidents of insensitivity and broken trust in their schools and how they were repaired.

**Chapter 4: Developing Professional Capacity for Shared Influence** looks at capacity building for teaching effectiveness and teacher leadership. The chapter discusses instructional capacity and the contemporary factors that increase expectations for effective teaching (such as 21st-century skills, the Common Core State Standards, and the New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium Standards) and identifies and describes the school culture factors that affect the development of professional capacity. We also note professional learning communities' (PLCs) features and practices—and the school culture elements that support them. Re-boot activities include assessing the school's capacity for 21st-century teaching, identifying areas for instructional improvement, and identifying potential teacher leaders.

**Chapter 5: Establishing a Student-Centered Learning Culture** describes a student-centered learning environment and the factors that create and sustain it. The chapter discusses how the following topics—holding high teacher expectations for each student's learning, creating a safe and orderly learning environment, providing academic press and academic and social supports, fostering caring and respectful relationships, and providing supportive peer norms—can promote student attendance, learning, achievement, and positive behaviors. We also address ways to build student resilience. Re-boot activities ask teachers and principals to describe what each of these factors looks like if practiced effectively in a school and has them assess the extent to which their school currently supports each factor.

**Chapter 6: Promoting and Creating Strong Parent–Community Ties** discusses the challenges and benefits of educators working effectively with parents and communities to promote student learning. Chapter topics include the importance of mutual respect and engagement among schools, families, and communities if students are to learn and achieve well; the concept of *cultural competence* and how it can improve teachers' relations with diverse students and parents; the varied roles available for parents to engage with schools; strategies for increasing and strengthening parent–community involvement; the importance of resilience and social capital on student learning; and the research on family involvement and student achievement. Re-boot activities ask team members to identify and discuss

varied barriers to school and family involvement and to assess their school—and themselves—on the degree to which they are overcoming these obstacles.

**Chapter 7: Developing a Plan for Action** brings all the chapters together with a realistic road map of what school leaders should consider as they plan for school culture re-boot and presents a 5-year, month-by-month timetable for shaping school culture. It ends with conclusions about educators shaping school culture.