

INTRODUCTION

IT WAS THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. All the students had been successfully matched with their classroom teachers, meaning that there were no forgotten girls or boys in the gym or walking the halls. Whew! I could feel the butterflies in my stomach subside. Now my only goal as a first-year elementary principal was to make sure that every student took the right bus home at the end of the day. Depending on the school, this can be a surprisingly tough task. I was in the conference room confirming bus assignments when my phone rang. It was one of our fifth-grade teachers asking me to come to her classroom.

Awesome, I thought. My first official student–teacher task of the year! I grabbed my trusty, school-issued radio and made my way to the classroom.

The teacher greeted me outside the door. I could immediately tell something was wrong. I'll never forget her next words: "I don't know what to do. I have a student stuck in the wall."

Yes, you read that right. A student was trapped in the wall. A very sweet fifth grader, Christopher (not his real name), had shimmied his way up the corner of the cubbies and slipped into the wall behind the cabinets. And now he couldn't get out. I can't remember all the thoughts that went through my head at that moment, but I do remember being convinced that I would have the world's shortest tenure as a school principal.

Over the next 45 minutes, I worked with my custodian to take apart the cabinets above the student cubbies. Within the hour, we

rescued Christopher. He was relatively calm, considering what he had just experienced. I lifted him out of the wall, and we walked together to the office. Once we'd sat down, I called his mom. "Hi, Mrs. Lemon," I said. "I need you to come to school for a meeting. It concerns Christopher."

She was noticeably upset. She asked if he was okay.

"Yes, he's fine," I told her. "We'll see you soon."

Christopher's mom arrived a few minutes later. What occurred next changed me forever as an educator. Mrs. Lemon shared that Christopher had been molested over the summer by an older family member. Thankfully, he'd been in therapy, but he was understandably very distraught over the situation. He was having trouble sleeping, and large crowds frightened him.

When school started that day, as a first-year principal I had images of smiles and hugs, classrooms filled with joy, fantastic teaching, and the great relationships we were destined to build throughout the year. I hadn't given much thought to anything other than developing instruction, cultivating relationships, and improving school letter grades.

In that moment, though, my very narrow view of education was shattered.

Don't misunderstand me. As a teacher, I'd had my share of difficult student issues. But as a teacher, I could always retreat to the principal's office. Together we could talk through issues and brainstorm solutions. Now that I was the principal, this was no longer the case. The gravity of my new role hit me like a ton of bricks.

I was not just responsible for the learning, I realized. I was responsible for *everything*: school safety, social and emotional learning, mental health, professional learning communities, strong family-school connections, teacher evaluations, state and federal accountability, creating a culture of excellence, and building a team of adults who were in it for the kids 100 percent of the time. It felt overwhelming. Reading through this list, it may seem overwhelming to you. But this is what it means to be a passionate, purposeful school leader.

This is what it means to be an instructional change agent.

LEADERS AND LEARNERS

In my years as an educator, I've watched and analyzed learning all over the world, in places ranging from China to New York City, from Native American reservations in South Dakota to rural areas of Hawaii. No matter the school, the culture, or the challenges, one thing remained the same: school leaders were looking for answers. They were looking for ways to create the very best learning environments. They wanted success for themselves, for their staff, and, most of all, for their students. To achieve this success, they wanted help. They craved to learn ways to be an instructional change agent for their school.

This craving for success was my motivation for writing the book you hold in your hands. I wrote *The Instructional Change Agent* to help you—and every other principal or administrator—become a more passionate, more deliberate, and more dynamic school leader. I wanted to contribute to our profession by delivering a guidebook that helps you reach your goals. Just think for a moment: Where do you want to be one year from now? What does that look like for you? I guarantee that *The Instructional Change Agent* will get you from where you are today to where you want to be tomorrow.

As pre-service, brand-new, or veteran leaders, we constantly look for new, more strategic solutions for our students and our faculty. In this way, we're leaders *and* learners. To succeed for ourselves and our students, we must continue to grow, develop, and improve. Anything less is unacceptable. I believe with all my heart that we have the most important job in the world. We're privileged to inspire hundreds, or even thousands, of minds every day. We impact three, if not four, generations of families every single day: students, parents, sometimes grandparents, and students' future children.

This is powerful to think about, isn't it?

Whether you're a graduate student working to be a school leader, a brand-new first-year principal, a seasoned principal at a new or long-term assignment, a technology director, a superintendent, a central office administrator, or even a mentor for other principals, *The Instructional Change Agent* will be an indispensable resource for helping you

increase your leadership capability through practical, easily applied strategies. Although each school is unique, these strategies are useful in all educational environments and situations. This includes grade schools, middle schools, and high schools. In addition, students, and even academics, will find many of the real-world scenarios useful in developing a deeper understanding of the challenges and triumphs of being a school leader. Regardless of your position or status, though, the key is that you spend time learning and growing, that you put effort into developing yourself.

Your students deserve it!

THE FOUR KEYS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

In providing a framework for improving school leadership, *The Instructional Change Agent* focuses on key principles and proven strategies for success in today's schools and classrooms. At the beginning of each chapter, a brief introduction defines all the necessary terms and helps set your expectations for the following text. As you'll see, each chapter contains three "Ways" that develop you as a leader. Some are direct Ways to enhance your leadership capacity; others are more indirect methods for developing teachers or engaging students. Each of these Ways provides a succinct process for implementation in your school. This includes explaining the "what," "why," and "how" of each leadership task. Each Way includes a "then what" to prime your thinking for next steps to consider for implementation. I also offer a few "what if" scenarios to prepare you for familiar challenges or obstacles. Finally, each Way includes a graphic checklist as a quick reference and handy summary.

I've organized these Ways into four clearly defined parts that reflect what I see as the four keys of school leadership: drive school culture, craft instructional practices, transform student engagement, and engage community partners. Part 1 of the book expands your understanding of school culture and offers Ways that prepare you to be an effective instructional change agent. Your ability to develop a positive and productive school culture is critical for student success.

Whether you like it or not, the moment you become the school leader, you impact school culture. Although it takes time to alter the trajectory of a school's culture, what you think, say, and do modifies the current culture immediately. This part offers five chapters, each with three Ways for better understanding school culture and changing it through innovative policies and plans.

Part 2 examines different Ways for crafting instructional practices. Every moment as a school leader is an opportunity to be the instructional leader for your school, to model and coach best practices for the classroom. It doesn't matter what subjects you taught prior to becoming a school leader; your job now is to find, identify, celebrate, and push for instructional excellence. The strategies embedded in this part of the book support instructional work to increase rigor, relevance, and learner engagement. To do this, we must support teachers in the pursuit of learning experiences that help students develop the new skills needed in a rapidly changing work environment.

In part 3, the emphasis shifts from instructional practices to student engagement. Although I think that each part of this book is critical to your ability to become the instructional change agent for your school, many readers may feel that part 3 is the most important. After all, if you don't have students engaged in learning, how much does culture or instruction really matter? The Ways in this part are based on the following four principles: have honest conversations, hold one another accountable, gain feedback from students, and always be present. By following these four principles, you can ensure that instruction in your school is inspiring and efficacious.

Part 4 then explores how best to engage community partners—business leaders, community leaders, and other stakeholders—in supporting and advocating for your school. This final part of the book promises to help you think in new ways about creating community partnerships to grow, enhance, and celebrate your school. Most of us didn't have graduate course work on how to engage community members. This is why many schools we enter lack an urgency in developing strong community networks. Yet in the most successful schools and school districts, the entire community works alongside educators to foster growth and ensure success. As you read through this part,

you'll realize that you have an opportunity every day to change community members' opinions of your school. But that doesn't happen by accident. Shaping the beliefs of an entire community takes strategic action and constant visibility. You're the face of the school, and it's your responsibility to show everyone else how amazing it is.

The book's structure offers you both the fundamental knowledge and the practical tools necessary to become a successful instructional change agent for your school. Each of these parts focuses on providing you with readily applicable strategies for effecting school change and ensuring positive educational outcomes. At its core, this is a practical resource, one that delivers both immediate and long-term results. But it's also an inspirational guide to collaborating with faculty and connecting with students. To help you understand and use the ideas and frameworks, I've incorporated a number of special features throughout the book, including the following:

- Checklist summaries of each of the 48 Ways presented in the book
- Exhibits and bulleted lists containing critical strategies, clear definitions, and helpful tools
- Planning and assessment tools
- Vignettes and real-world examples that help illustrate key lessons and stimulate reflection
- An appendix with a Way–Application Matrix and reproducible versions of the most important templates and worksheets presented throughout the book

Highlight ideas, write in the margins, fold over pages, and use *The Instructional Change Agent* as an everyday resource. I purposely designed the book to be flexible and modular. You can read it cover to cover if you like. Or maybe you're currently focusing on learner engagement in your school and prefer to read that section. Go ahead—jump right to part 3! The book is designed so that practitioners can easily navigate each chapter and locate specific topics or strategies. This means you can skip from chapter to chapter and pull out what you need, when you need it.

You can also find additional resources online that support *The Instructional Change Agent*. This is a continually developing platform of tools and presentations that you now have access to because you purchased this book. There are also other ways that we can connect to keep the instructional change agent movement afloat. Watch for Twitter chats, Voxer groups, special access to live video groups, blogs, podcasts, special videoconferencing invitations, and other alternative media that can help grow our professional learning community. I'm committed to continuing to provide these resources because I believe in you. You matter to me. I truly think that you—the school leader—are the key to student success.

Let's lead the change we wish to see in our schools!