

# Change Agents

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# Change Agents

Transforming Schools From  
the Ground Up

Justin Cohen

CORWIN

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# About the Author

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**Justin Cohen** (he/him/his)

is a writer, organizer, activist, and dad. His work explores how education, race, privilege, and public policy intersect. He cofounded Wayfinder Foundation and Neighbors Reimagining Public Safety. He is on the board of Friends of Abolitionist Place, helping to create a heritage center in downtown Brooklyn, committed to preserving radical

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# Are You a Change Agent?

# 1

## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA



The mood in the teachers' lounge at César Chávez Elementary School was, in a word, skeptical.

And to be honest, kind of exhausted.

The three educators who made up the school's fourth-grade teaching team sat at a small table, eating their respective lunches, while sharing ambivalent glances between bites.

It was rare for teachers to dine together at Chávez, as the school had become a challenging place to work. It was the fall of 2010, and since the late 1990s, state officials in California had labeled this little school in East San Jose as "persistently failing." The school shared this strange label with hundreds of schools in California, not to mention thousands more across the country. Almost all of such schools served children and families whose identities were already marginalized by powerful institutions.

After two decades of government scolding and sanction, the teachers still in the building were either stalwarts or newbies, and almost nothing in between. Teaching at Chávez meant that you were either ruthlessly dedicated to serving the community's children or didn't yet understand the waters into which you were wading.

The reality of this situation sat uneasily on the fourth-grade teachers, who munched on an array of homemade sandwiches and mini carrots

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and yogurt cups, making nervous chitchat while they waited for a “guest” who was set to arrive any minute now.

The guest for whom they waited was supposed to help them navigate the complexities of school transformation, but if history was any indication, they were bound to be disappointed. Decades of empirical evidence and sociological study indicated that schools like Chávez needed more and different resources to best serve students. Federal and state school improvement policy, on the other hand, tended to ignore and minimize this reality. The fourth-grade team had witnessed, firsthand, many years of lawmaking that eschewed empirical research, while embracing the questionable logic that increasingly draconian sanctions would drive school improvement.

Adding insult to injury, these sorts of sanctions for struggling schools were preceded by decades of disinvestment in the public sector at large, leaving schools to act as the primary locus of public services for families, in lieu of an actual social safety net.

Hence, their skepticism.

These esoteric policy concerns, though, on most days only constituted background noise. While teachers at Chávez and other schools toiled to improve outcomes for children, the message that came through above the noise, often at a fever pitch, was that educators themselves were to blame for these decades of multidimensional institutional failure.

Bad test scores? “Blame the teachers!” Pandemic-induced school closures? “Blame the teachers!”

But what if both test scores and unsafe conditions in public schools are the consequence of centuries of racial segregation, propagated by an unjust housing market and compounded by decades of civic divestment and systemic mismanagement?

“You must not have heard us. BLAME THE TEACHERS!”

The fourth-grade teachers at Chávez had, in fact, heard.

They were used to hearing all of this—and worse—but they patiently, and somewhat dubiously, waited for the person who was scheduled to join them for lunch on this particular day.

The guest for whom they waited for was a former teacher in the district named Meaghen. Meaghen also was anxious about the meeting. She had been brought back to the school, through a partnership with a local nonprofit organization, to serve as a coach. In the preceding weeks, she had attempted to make herself feel at home at Chávez, but because of space constraints, she was working out of a repurposed supply closet that smelled like lunchroom detritus. When she tried to hide the smell by spraying ridiculous quantities of “Paradise Breeze” air freshener, the closet ended up smelling like “Paradise Breeze”-scented trash.

Meaghen had been introduced to the teachers at a faculty meeting the week before by René Sanchez, the principal, who described her as an improvement coach who was “here to help.”

(Aside: Nobody will blame you if you just laughed or rolled your eyes.)

Most educators, especially those who have spent time in the crosshairs of school improvement regimes, have encountered a bevy of slick consultants from “the outside.” These self-appointed experts show up at schools, often armed with a PowerPoint presentation and “The Answer”—capital T, capital A—for how to improve struggling schools. The teachers at Chávez had heard this song and dance many, many times before, and they were not eager to hear it again.

To the surprise of the fourth-grade team, though, Meaghen was singing a different tune.

She walked into the lounge, the faint smell of “Paradise Breeze” still trailing behind her. She sat down at the table, with obvious humility, and said, “I bet you think I’m going to tell you I have ‘The Answer.’ I don’t. Mostly, I’m here to ask you questions—one question, in particular.”

The teachers shared a glance, then gestured for her to continue.

“Has anyone ever asked **you**,” Meaghen said, “what **you** think needs to happen to make this school great?”

## What if We Told You That You’re Not the Problem . . . but That You’re the Solution?

Being a classroom educator has never been harder, so if the Chávez teachers’ cocktail of anxiety, ambivalence, and hope sounds familiar to you, you’re not alone.

Surveys conducted in the last 10 years indicate that teacher job satisfaction is at a quarter-century low, and that was *before* the pandemic. The combination of declining real resources for schools, increased expectations for teachers, greater public scrutiny, and more high-stakes accountability has destabilized the profession, making many educators' lives miserable in the process. COVID-19 only worsened the situation, with acute health and safety concerns layered on top of the uncertainty of toggling between virtual and in-person schooling at a moment's notice.

Plenty of people pay lip service to the notion that the joy has been sucked out of teaching, but few education leaders seem willing to do anything with that information. Teachers, meanwhile, are tasked with solving social problems well outside their spans of control, at the same time as we expect them to help young people thrive against the never-static backdrop of our contemporary world. When teachers *are* invited to the table for policy conversations, it can seem like an afterthought, being asked to opine on decisions that were already made.

In short, educators work against difficult odds, with a fraction of the resources necessary to do the job, all while garnering unconscionably little respect from the populace at large.

And what do teachers do in response?

Show up every . . . single . . . day . . . and rise to the challenge anyway, for as Shirley Chisholm once said, "If they don't invite you to the table, bring in a folding chair."

But wouldn't it be nice if you didn't have to bring a folding chair? What would it actually look like for teachers to be at the center of discussions about school transformation?

This question is more important than ever, as educators everywhere struggle to make sense of the chaos wrought by unprecedented times. Marginalized communities, as usual, experienced the most devastating consequences of the pandemic, but even the most privileged people and institutions can't escape the fallout. Chronic uncertainty is an unfortunate historical reality in communities that experience systemic underresourcing, but the destabilization is a new phenomenon for folks accustomed to privilege.

Fortunately, we have proven models for how to—and how not to—engage educators in driving transformational change against unpredictable headwinds.



Unfortunately, most government-sanctioned “school improvement” work ignores those lessons.

To understand why this happens, a short digression into the recent history of school improvement policy is useful; but if that kind of stuff bores you, please feel free to skip ahead to the section titled, “OK, Cool, Got You, but What Do We Do Now?”

### **In Which We Digress, Ever so Briefly, to Establish Some Historical Policy Context**

For the last 30 years or so, lawmakers have tried to legislate the improvement of schools.

While educators on the ground have worked hard to do this work for literally generations, the contemporary school improvement zeitgeist was birthed from the federal government’s decision, at the turn of the 21st century, to hold states and their schools accountable for annual gains on standardized tests. Measuring performance in a transparent way isn’t a bad idea, in theory; but for the last generation, “accountability” in education was often oversimplified as “testing,” and that dumbing down of important concepts did real harm to the profession.

First and foremost, measuring schools with tests meant that almost all schools identified as “struggling” served high concentrations of children from Black, Latinx, and low-income families. Testing became a proxy for privilege, and not much more. Centuries of institutional racism and underinvestment have created significant and measurable disparities in wealth, income, housing, and health for marginalized folks, so there’s no surprise that these factors manifest in public schooling too. Annual testing played a role in making these disparities more obvious to lay people, but identifying problems is most useful when our methods of assessment offer clues for how to solve them.

Testing, as we know, did not do that. While standardized tests, used in narrow ways, can provide broad insights, education policymakers in the last two decades started to use tests in ways for which they were never intended, like teacher evaluation. This heightened focus on testing usually came with few resources for pursuing improvement strategies. Schools that struggled to serve marginalized children were told to get better . . . or else. The scolding rarely came with both resources and support, and sometimes even came with financial consequences,

due to federal regulations requiring states to divert funds to private companies.

It's no surprise, then, that the accountability era in education left a graveyard of "*pre-failed educational strategies*" in its wake. A pre-failed strategy is something that was never going to work, like covering up a pothole with construction paper. Pre-failed school improvement approaches were fated to go awry, not just because they were designed to address the wrong underlying problems, but because they rarely incorporated the perspectives of educators like you.

### **OK, Cool, Got You, but What Do We Do Now?**

The era of high-stakes accountability in American schools will end in a protracted whimper and not with a bang. Federal monetary investment in school improvement peaked in the Obama administration, and states continue to roll back strict accountability measures. Since 2020, the systemic response to the COVID-19 pandemic has consumed most of the energy in the public sector, and schools have been no exception, meaning that public attention to testing, and the outcomes they illuminate, is minimal.

*But let's not get confused:* While test-based accountability, and the draconian improvement strategies that followed, may have fallen out of favor, we still have massive challenges in our schools, particularly those that serve our most marginalized families. Schools should be our country's great equalizers, but instead they often perpetuate—or even exacerbate—our society's biggest inequities.

If this mental struggle sounds familiar, maybe that's why you picked up this book in the first place.

You know that there are issues with how our schools serve the kids who need us the most, but most of the solutions on the table seem disconnected, antiquated, and inadequate. In the midst of all of that, despite lots of speechifying to the contrary, you're pretty sure that the problem is not you but the system itself, which was *never* designed with *all* of our kids—not to mention the realities of the real world—in mind.

And you know what? You're right. You're not the problem.

In fact, you might be the solution.

## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA



René Sanchez, the principal of Chávez Elementary School, was eager for his fourth-grade teachers to disprove the conventional wisdom about “failing schools,” a label he despised.

René had started his career as a teacher at Chávez in the 1990s. Even then, the school had an outsized reputation for being a place where chronic underperformance was met with community resistance. In the community organizing text, *A Match on Dry Grass*, Chávez at that time is described as a place where hundreds of parents would show up to community meetings wearing bright yellow t-shirts and stickers that proclaimed “70%”—for the number of eighth graders who couldn’t read at grade level.

By the time René came back to be principal in 2009, Chávez was still the lowest-performing elementary school in the Alum Rock Union School District. That district, which is among the poorest in the United States, is located in one of the wealthiest cities in the history of the world: San Jose, California. Nestled on the fringes of Silicon Valley, San Jose is home to more billionaires and millionaires per capita than any other place in America.

In a more equitable country, such an extraordinary concentration of wealth might lead to unparalleled public services. The dystopian disparities of American civic governance, however, mean that while the founders of Facebook and Apple live in the apricot groves of San Jose’s western hills, the Alum Rock community is in the flatlands of East San Jose, where most families live in poverty. The district serves over 10,000 students, almost all of whom are Spanish-speaking, and close to 90 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch at school, which is a proxy for measuring poverty.

While the community pressure of the 1990s led to modest improvements in the school’s appearance, the cosmetic shifts could not hide basic educational facts: Just a small percentage of Alum Rock students would go on to achieve postsecondary academic success,

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and the educational outcomes at Chávez were dire enough to land the school on the short list of schools in the country that struggle the most.

René soon discovered that being the principal of such a school didn't leave a person with a lot of wiggle room. He tried making some bold changes during his first year as principal, but the measurable results were disappointing. Before his second year as principal, the district superintendent had a sit-down with René to let him know that the clock was ticking. If the school didn't improve the coming year, the superintendent warned, he might have to invoke "reconstitution," which, under federal regulations, would mean removing half of the staff and assigning them to other schools.

Drastic, to say the least.

René was dead set against reconstitution. He, more than anyone, knew that school was still struggling, but he had only been principal for a year, and having grown up in the community—not to mention having spent his whole career as an educator in Alum Rock—he knew that things could get better.

René was ready to take matters into his own hands, but given the prior year's lackluster results, he conceded that he needed help. To avoid reconstitution, he and the superintendent came to a tentative agreement: René would have one more year to show measurable improvement. To help accelerate progress, he would have to accept some support from an instructional coach who was steeped in the classroom and also trained to lead a new, teacher-centric model for school transformation.

That's how Meaghen ended up in the old supply closet.

## **Educators Don't Need to Wait for Someone Else to Ignite the Change**

While high-stakes testing was disruptive to many schools, the accountability era's overt focus on results introduced two inescapable truths into mainstream conversation about schools.

The first fact is hard to swallow: Many struggling schools show up on the governments' lists every year, meaning that *persistent* underperformance is a reality for a subset of schools. Some schools, *even when compared with schools with comparable demographics*, collapse into cycles of replicating underwhelming outcomes, and after spending enough time in that cycle, it's really hard to escape. The situation is a little like crossing the event horizon of a black hole or being trapped in the Matrix: You have a nagging suspicion that something is wrong, but there's no obvious off-ramp. The persistent struggles of schools like these have caused some policymakers to argue that school improvement is a fruitless endeavor that isn't even worth pursuing. "Bad schools will always be bad," they argue, "so let's not throw good money after bad."

That logic is wrong, and we know this because of the second inescapable fact: The accountability era's relentless emphasis on measurement revealed that *some schools break the cycle*. The existence of schools that don't fit the mold, by beating the odds and shattering the pattern of underperformance, should be a source of enormous hope and celebration. Instead, many policymakers reject the study of those schools and want to dismiss them as "outliers" that we should ignore—a glitch in the Matrix, if you will.

We think that those schools, and the adults who work in them, should be our focus.

Because once you know that transformation is possible, it's hard to look away. And when you look more closely, you start to see success stories everywhere—sharp little glimmers of light and hope dotting a landscape of paper-covered potholes.

Those glimmers of hope inspired this book because they caused us to wonder this: What would happen if we gave educators the tools necessary to change the odds for themselves?

For the last 30 years, the educators at Partners in School Innovation, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization, have been working shoulder-to-shoulder with educators to accelerate school change, and through pursuing that work, dramatic transformation seems to happen. A lot.

We think it can happen even more.

That's where you come in. We think that you and some other folks at your school need to be in on this action.

Before we go any further, though, it's important to be honest about what it takes to accomplish sustainable transformation in challenging

educational environments. The work is hard, and it takes a long time. Think years, not weeks. During those years, some of your peers will be annoyed at you for embracing what they view as unrealistic ambitions, especially at a time when schools are already beset by seemingly endless challenges. You know how Mrs. Howard usually gives Janine's youthful enthusiasm side-eye on *Abbott Elementary*, but then ends up helping out in the end? It'll be sort of like that.

Meanwhile, spoiler alert! There aren't any silver-bullet solutions or shortcuts. You'll experience many setbacks in the process, and you will almost certainly need to make unpopular, counterintuitive decisions in the process.

Does that sound like something you might be interested in taking on?

You're still with me?

Cool.

Because do you know how transformation starts? It's usually when an educator like you decides to do things a different way.

That's how you become a change agent.

### Facing Facts . . . and Owning Them

When you're a frontline educator—a teacher, a principal, or an instructional coach who spends every day in school buildings—there are plenty of people outside of schools who want to explain your problems to you: the state, the federal government, the local newspaper, or that one particularly opinionated person at the community meeting (you know who I'm talking about).

When René started his second year as principal at Chávez, he wasn't confused about the results his school was achieving. Nobody knew the data better than he did. The dirty secret in struggling schools is that everyone in the building knows they have issues; they just don't like it when outsiders rub their noses in that fact . . . especially when those outsiders have never set foot in the community.

The farther critics are from the challenges our schools face, the more likely they are to focus on the least nuanced sources of data, which in turn leads to picking the least promising solutions to said challenges. Rating schools based on test scores became the standard during the accountability era—not because those tests were valid, but because they were convenient and easy to explain. Standardized tests are blunt instruments, but everyone understands the concept of a test. Our other

mechanisms for assessing school transformation require more explanation, which is a difficult problem when shaping public opinion or policy. As they say in politics, “If you’re explaining, you’re losing.”

One of the first steps to becoming a change agent in your own school, then, is to identify concrete, observable factors that are within your control and figure out how to talk about them. We all know that there’s more to a school than a single test score, so educators who want to be change agents need to reclaim the conversation about outcomes in a way that is supportive of educators’ efforts and not antagonistic toward them.

If you’re not sure where to start, ask yourself the following questions:

**Attendance:** What does our student attendance look like? How about teacher attendance? Are there different trends at different grade levels?

**Discipline & Suspension Rates:** How many students get referred to the office every month? Do we have a lot of suspensions and expulsions in our school? Are there racial disparities in how discipline is administered?

**Interim Assessments:** Do we have interim assessments that let us know whether or not students are reading or doing mathematics at grade level? If so, can those assessments tell us much about the quality and patterns of classroom instruction?

**Climate & Belonging:** Does our school provide the sort of personal and professional safety necessary for adults and children to take learning risks? Do students feel like they belong here, and what are we doing to increase their sense of psychological well-being?

**Long-Term Outcomes:** How many of our students eventually graduate from high school on time? Of those that graduate, how many achieve postsecondary success? How do we know? How many get a two- or four-year degree? Are our graduates thriving more generally? Are our former students employed and civically active in their mid-20s?

While some of these questions have taken a back seat to examining test scores, these are perhaps the most important short- and long-term measures to assess when looking at school performance. Schools, after all, should help launch young people into healthy, fulfilling lives. Tests were deployed as an imperfect proxy for a bigger picture.

Once you consider the top-line information, you need to go deeper. Some statisticians will tell you that “the data tell the story,” but that’s not true. Numbers alone tell an incomplete story. Data and statistics provide useful supporting evidence for a bigger narrative that only you and your colleagues can shape about your school because you know what’s actually happening behind classroom doors.

Once you and some peers look at these and other sources of data, it’s important to take stock of what you’ve learned about your current situation. Once in a while, something specific will jump out in the data that’s impossible to ignore. For example, you might say, “Whoa, one of our fifth-grade classrooms consistently gets way better math results; what’s happening there?”

More often than not, however, the picture is muddier, with just as many ups, downs, and inconsistencies as there are definitive patterns. In schools with chronic issues, just about everything can “look bad on paper.”

That’s the problem that René and the fourth-grade team at Chávez faced, and that’s why figuring out how and where to start is such an important part of the school transformation journey.



## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

The data, in short, did not look good. René knew it. His boss, the superintendent, knew it. Meaghen knew it, and so did the fourth-grade teachers.

It was not the data itself, though, but rather the promise of doing something different with it this time that had enticed the fourth-grade team into meeting with Meaghen in the first place. The teachers, like René, knew that the prior year had been a disappointment from a student performance standpoint. They weren’t entirely sure why, though, and Meaghen had suggested that a hard look at data might open some interesting doors of discovery.

Meaghen prepared for that first meeting with the fourth-grade team by assembling lots of information, disaggregated by grade level, classroom, and student demographics. She also created a



comprehensive list of the major academic programs that were happening in the school, including one of the school's signature initiatives, "Response to Intervention."

Response to Intervention is a common framework that schools use to identify and support students who fall behind their peers in learning how to read at grade level. When comparing Chávez's student data to the program's objectives, though, the fourth-grade teachers detected a mismatch. Whereas successful implementation of the Response to Intervention model depends on identifying under 30 percent of a school's students for interventions, the program data at Chávez indicated that well over half of the school was eligible for the program.

Having so many students identified for intervention strategies was overloading the circuits. The fourth-grade teachers supplemented that data with a critical observation: Reading specialists throughout the school were spread thinly, leading to burnout, which further supported the narrative the data was suggesting.

There was another important question lurking in the intervention data, though: Why did so many children in the school need reading interventions in the first place? Was it possible that the school was experiencing a challenge with the baseline quality of classroom instruction?

These questions constituted the first of many uncomfortable realities that Meaghen and the fourth-grade team at Chávez would have to entertain. The middling results were not news to the teachers; the notion that someone would ask them for their opinion as to what to do next was, in fact, unique.

Encouraged by the frankness and openness of that first meeting with Meaghen, the group agreed to meet again the following week. They committed to studying school improvement strategies as a group and agreed that they should be open to doing things differently, even if that required them to change their own personal instructional practices.

For Meaghen, whose training as a coach taught her to listen, ask questions, and identify the most fruitful venues for launching school transformation, the fourth-grade team's combination of frankness, openness to change, and collaborative teamwork was a gold mine.

## Follow the Data, Pick a Target, Then . . . Do Stuff

Meaghen's approach to inquiry and transformation was not accidental, but systematic. In the course of a generation characterized by the fits and starts of lackluster school improvement, our field has learned a lot of important lessons about how to, and how not to, pursue systemic change. First among those lessons is that there's no one right way to start improving a school. While policymakers peddle silver bullets and high-priced consultants sell solutions, the reality is that school transformation requires consistent, intentional, relationship-driven implementation of continuous improvement strategies, rooted in equity.

Unfortunately, it would be a terrible idea to put "consistent, intentional, relationship-driven implementation of continuous improvement strategies, rooted in equity" on a bumper sticker. That's more or less the reason we wrote a whole book.

As a school transformation coach, one of the first lessons Meaghen learned was how to put her "shoulder to your wheel." In other words, frontline educators lead, and the coach follows. In the case of Chávez Elementary, the teachers identified the fact that many children were reading below grade level, even relative to demographically similar schools and classrooms. The natural question to ask after unpacking this data was whether there existed challenges with executing grade-level reading instruction in classrooms. While even asking this question was uncomfortable, the alternative explanation—that something was wrong with the children—was untenable.

While grade-level reading instruction seemed like the natural first step at Chávez, "putting a shoulder to your wheel" means following the data, not a playbook. If student attendance is unusually low in a school, it's impossible to move instructional quality because you can't teach a kid who isn't there. A similar problem manifests when high numbers of students are being referred for out-of-school suspension: Learning doesn't happen just because we send a student away.

Sometimes, evaluating data reveals difficult-to-stomach realities about what we prioritize in schools. Many schools experience "within-school opportunity gaps," wherein overall numbers present a very different picture than when the same data is disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status. For example, some high schools offer AP courses but find that very few Latinx students are enrolled in those classes. In other cases, extraordinary proportions of the students who are referred to the administration for disciplinary issues turn out to be Black or Latinx

males. While confronting these truths requires deep introspection about the harmful effects of institutionalized racism, ignoring them merely perpetuates inequity.

For better or worse, there is no shortage of issues that require focus in a struggling school, so the hard part about being a change agent is not finding an area of focus, but rather narrowing that focus to something achievable.

Picking a place to start is equal parts art and science, but the following guiding questions can help identify good candidates:

***Where does our data exhibit clear room for growth, especially relative to schools with comparable demographic data?*** If your school is a clear outlier, something is wrong. But on the bright side, when you are an outlier, the problem you face probably has a solution, as other educators have gotten different results in comparable environments. Will the things that work elsewhere always work in your school? Of course not. But the odds suggest that there is much you can learn from similar schools.

***What instructional tools are equally useful in both virtual and in-person schooling?*** The short-term consequences of COVID-19 on educational systems, and the families served by them, have been devastating. One of the hardest parts of teaching in this era is the unpredictable shifts between in-person learning, which is suboptimal from a safety perspective, and remote virtual learning, which just about everyone agrees is less effective from an instructional standpoint. Which instructional methods and tools seem to work well in both environments? And is it possible to reorganize lesson planning and pacing to accommodate sudden shifts?

***Is there a place where we can make fast progress and build momentum?*** A big part of school transformation is persistence, and it's hard to maintain focus without quick wins, particularly in environments that are either rapidly changing or presenting multiple worthy challenges at once. One of many challenges with high-stakes testing is information lag: Standardized test results take many months to process, and once teachers get results, the students who were tested usually have advanced a grade. It's hard to build momentum based on data when you don't get to see that data until your kids are long gone. If there are areas where you can show fast, measurable improvement, go for it. *And by fast, we mean FAST, like in a week.*

*Is there a challenge that is best addressed as a team?* School transformation requires collaboration at every level. While individual educators can exhibit episodic acts of greatness, sustained excellence at the school level requires teamwork. While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented levels of physical isolation, the mainstream use of videoconferencing tools, while not terribly effective for classroom instruction, may simplify group work among teachers. Such group collaboration is essential for transformation. To achieve sustained excellence, collaboration is critical, so picking challenges that lend themselves to virtual work—whether the pandemic is with us or not—can help.

*What problem can we solve that doesn't require an infusion of new resources?* Not all school improvement strategies are free, but some are. In schools where new money is hard to find, picking opportunities for quick wins that are low cost—or even better, free—is a great way to build momentum.

While this is not an exhaustive list of questions, it's a good place to start. In the process of addressing these issues with your fellow educators, you're bound to come up with even more questions that can drive discussion.

Where you decide to focus, in some ways, is less important than the process you use to identify those areas of focus. In the process of discovery, you'll be exercising many of the important muscles that you'll need to tone in order to carry out the long-term process of school transformation: teamwork, collaboration, adopting an equity lens, honesty, listening, goal-setting, progress monitoring, and real-time data analysis, to name a few.



## CÉSAR CHÁVEZ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

After meeting a couple of times, Meaghen and the fourth-grade change agents unearthed a promising idea for how to initiate improvement. The idea was rooted in how their district managed reading instruction.

Years before, the central office adopted a pacing schedule for how to teach reading, rooted in a methodology called “direct instruction.”

Using this approach meant that, on any given day in the district, fourth graders across the district would be working on the same content. Teachers worked from “pacing guides” that outlined the topics to be addressed throughout a school year, aligned to what the district suspected would be included on standardized tests. This setup was appealing to some central office folks because it provided built-in mechanisms for assessing implementation fidelity. That said, because all lessons and unit plans were handed down from the district, teachers rarely developed intensive relationships with the content. Teachers were told what to teach and when to teach it. Teachers, as a result, grew accustomed to describing lessons according to the color coding and not the content itself:

“We’re teaching green on Tuesday.”

“It’s Thursday, so you know it’s a yellow lesson.”

Few educators knew what “green” or “yellow” meant. It was just vague color coding on prepackaged materials.

While the fourth-grade team wasn’t sure how they would improve reading instruction, they knew they had to adjust the current approach. First, they decided to get more familiar with the grade-level content standards. Understanding standards at a deeper level seemed like a precursor to helping students reach them. As an instructional coach, Meaghen had received extensive training on standards-based instruction, so she was well-equipped to shepherd this process. She brought the teachers resources, research-based texts, and student work samples to help the learning process.

Second, the teachers agreed to engage in a reciprocal process of observation and feedback. While this sounds like a natural thing to do in schools, for many educators this remains quite unusual and radical. Many teachers treat their classrooms as private territory, and because of how school schedules are organized, it’s hard to make time to watch another teacher teach.

Research, however, consistently indicates that collaborative instruction, rooted in observation and a framework for improvement, is a precursor to academic improvement. Meaghen, as a coach, was steeped in that research.

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And so, as a team, the fourth-grade change agents agreed to make time to watch each other teach and then provide constructive feedback on that instruction. They worked with physical education and art teachers to do micro scheduling adjustments so that one teacher could be in the metaphorical spotlight at a time when the rest of the team didn't have classroom responsibilities. The goal was not just to watch, but to help each other improve, so their final step at this point was to set measurable goals for the improvement of their practice, on a realistic timeline.

They didn't know it at the time, but in the process of creating and committing to time-limited goals, the fourth-grade team had just engaged in their first ever "ROCI" cycle.

### **ROCI: The Technical Secret Sauce at the Heart of This Whole Book**

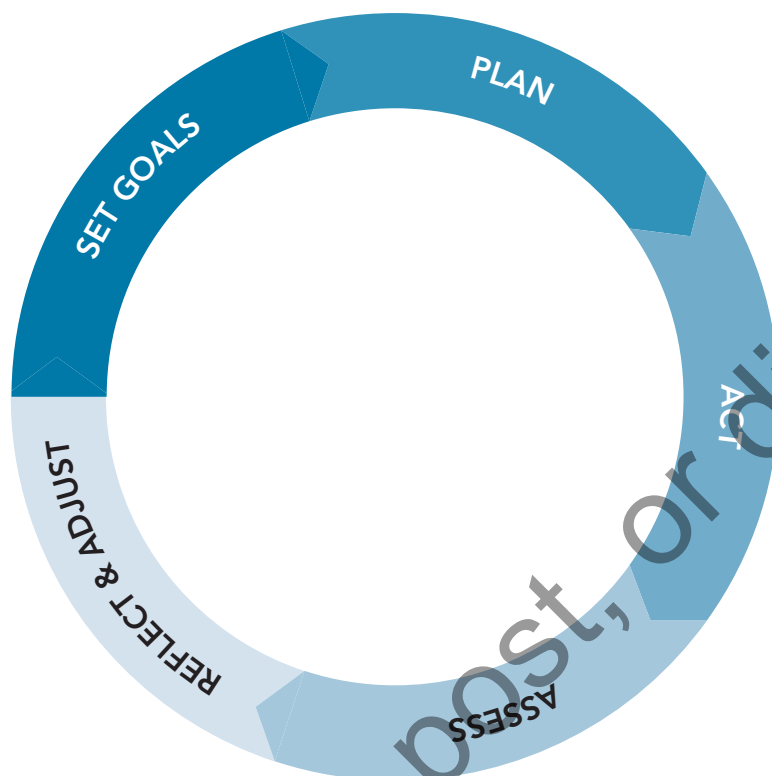
At Chávez Elementary, Meaghen acted as a coach, friend, mentor, and facilitator, while the fourth-grade crew identified their first major improvement effort. After picking a target together, they took several additional steps, which together form the basis of what we call "results-oriented cycles of inquiry," or ROCI (pronounced ROW-see).

*Spoiler alert:* ROCI is the only acronym we will use in this entire book. Seriously. Overusing acronyms is soooo 2010 and gets in the way of deep understanding. But we are going to use this one. A lot. That's how important it is, so you should get used to reading it and saying it aloud.

The ROCI process goes something like this: On a weekly basis, grade-level teams meet to compare lesson plans, identify high-leverage instructional targets for the coming week, look at student work together, and set achievable goals against each of those activities. Meanwhile, school leadership teams monitor progress, establish priorities for schoolwide professional learning, provide resources for achieving those targets, and otherwise support the work of the teachers in the school.

After establishing weekly sets of objectives, educators agree to meet again the following week to reassess and reflect. In doing so, educators create a perpetual motion machine of school improvement. That's the ROCI process. If you spend more than 10 minutes with someone in this book who's engaged in transformation work, you're bound to hear them mention ROCI.

## Simple ROCI



“What’s on the agenda for our next ROCI cycle?”

“Did you share the latest ROCI reflections with the principal yet?”

“What did we ROCI last month?”

ROCI is shorthand for an improvement process, yes, but it is much more than that. It is an ethos, a way of being, and perhaps most importantly, as it was used in that last example quotation, ROCI is a verb.

The active nature of ROCI is central to the work of school transformation. Improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools is a physical process that requires full participation, all the time.

And while ROCI is a technical process, it is anchored in ancient wisdom. As the old saying goes, “Insanity is doing the *same* thing you’ve always done and expecting *different* results.”

ROCI is just a clever way of making sure you try something *different* this time and then following through to determine if that change in behavior leads to *different* results, ideally a measurable improvement. It's important to remember, though, that nothing goes perfectly the first time you try it. ROCI isn't about trying and jettisoning things in the course of a week. It's about creating regular touch points to refine, improve, and iterate on novel practices, which we otherwise might not see through to their natural conclusions.

While this concept is simple to explain, it's hard to execute in practice. Teachers can sit on a Zoom call, as a team of adults, and come to a calm, rational agreement about what to do once they're delivering a lesson. But every educator knows that the best intentions can go hay-wire once they're in front of a couple dozen kids. Classroom management headaches, videoconferencing lags, scheduling mishaps, moods, internet outages, and software bugs all get in the way of executing the instructional changes that you and your peers agreed to pursue.

What's more, even if you do manage to shift your practice, there's no guarantee that it will lead to quick results. Sometimes, we pick the right strategy but at the wrong time. Once in a while, the correct strategy seems wrong at first until we build the skills necessary to make it work. Other times, we pick the wrong strategy and have to regroup.

But guess what? That's all a part of that ROCI life because the important part is not to get everything exactly right all of the time. The goal is to create an accountability structure for the creation of good, new habits. Once we know what habits we're trying to build, ROCI helps us commit to practical behavior changes, monitor that commitment, and assess the extent to which we achieve results as a consequence.

If this sounds easy, let's keep in mind that millions of people pay for gym memberships that they never use and that the fad diet business is a multi-billion-dollar industry.

In other words: Building new habits is hard. We ROCI to build new habits.

### Are You Ready for This?

So I know what you *may* be thinking at this point: "I didn't become a teacher to be a school transformation expert. I'm also not super confident that I'm a 'change agent,' which is giving big 'overachieving main character' vibes. I have never engaged in continuous improvement



before, everyone at my school is in a collective hangover from the last couple of years, and I have no time for this. Also, I have no idea what ‘ROCI’ is, and, if we’re keeping it extremely real, it sounds a little cheesy. Are you sure you want ME to do this?”

The answer is, “Yes. Yes, I do.” You kind of have to. Because if you don’t, who will?

I make a good point, right?

The whole purpose of this book is to demystify the process of ground-up school transformation for educators like you and your colleagues. If the last two years have taught us anything, it’s that the old ways of doing things are inadequate. Educators are being asked to adapt to circumstances unlike any we’ve seen before, and the top-down approaches to change that characterized public policy until now will never be adaptive or culturally responsive enough for the world in which we live.

Certain schools that have struggled for years—decades even—have always been ripe for ground-up transformation; in a postpandemic world, it seems that all schools are. In the world we’re living in, just about everyone feels like a novice teacher again.

This book is based on the real work of frontline educators, using their actual factual names. The stories herein happened between 2010 and 2020, and while we’ve all lived several lifetimes since then, there’s an enormous amount we can learn from how our peers upended norms and broke barriers in their own schools. While all the educators in this book worked closely with Partners in School Innovation, we know that many more people can do this work without consultants, given the right tools.

Speaking of tools, the concept of “improvement science,” which informs the technical parts of the ROCI approach, has been all the rage with process-obsessed researchers for decades. That said, there’s not much use for a theory that excites academics but eludes educators. Doing the technical part of improvement science—without understanding the ways in which race, privilege, equity, and opportunity intersect in our schools—is a recipe for disaster. That’s why the stories and guidance in this book are both anchored in the practical application of improvement science *and* also rooted in a deep structural critique of inequitable systems. You’ll notice that “both/and” theme emerging lots of times throughout the book.

More than anything, though, we want you to pick up this book, wherever you are, read a few chapters, and then get to work. To help you do that, we'll tell stories (like the ones about the educators at Chávez Elementary) and then describe the skills and mindsets educators adopted in those stories. As such, we're using a narrative structure that switches back and forth between storytelling and explanatory writing. Lots of people enjoy that style, but some find the alternation distracting. If you're finding it hard to follow, don't sweat it. Try reading all of the shaded vignettes in a chapter first, then read the other parts after. To make it easier to act on what you've learned, we'll end every chapter with a checklist summary, reminding you of the concrete steps taken on the path to transformation.

This first chapter was all about *getting started*. School transformation isn't a linear process, so it's hard to identify a clear starting point for this work. That said, because school transformation is, at its core, about personal transformation, we're starting in the most natural place: *wherever you are*.

So what do you think? Are you ready to be one of the change agents your school needs?

Because if you are, you're going to need some comrades in the struggle. It's impossible to do this work alone. Fear not, though. We have some ideas about where you can find them, and that's what the next chapter is all about.

## THE GETTING STARTED CHECKLIST

- **Embrace your role as a change agent.** We don't need to wait for outsiders' permission to do things differently. If you suspect your school could be doing something better, say so. The admission can be liberating, and you might find out that there are some other educators who have been thinking the exact same thing.
- **Keep your eye open for other change agents in your school.** In this chapter, the fourth-grade team and the school principal were natural allies in starting school transformation. That doesn't need to be the case. Your ragtag group of change agents might include an instructional coach, a paraprofessional, or a crossing guard. Find whoever else is relentlessly committed to change and start a conversation.

- **Acknowledge your challenges and commit to addressing them.** Even the highest-performing schools have challenges that need addressing, especially in an era of pandemic-induced instructional shifts. Wherever your school is on the performance continuum, there is something that would benefit from rapid improvement and progress monitoring. In the case of underresourced schools in marginalized communities, the hard part won't be finding a challenge to address but figuring out where to start. Sit down with an instructional coach, other teachers, an assistant principal, or any trusted colleague to begin the conversation.
- **Look at data together and talk about what you see.** *While data don't tell the whole story, qualitative and quantitative information can help to start an objective conversation. When you sit down with your colleagues, use a few critical data points as a starting point. And remember, when we say "data," we don't just mean "test scores."* Data is so much more than high-stakes testing, and if we only look at scores, we'll miss huge opportunities to make measurable changes on a shorter timeline. If data is "not your thing," that's okay. You're having these conversations to get more comfortable with using data in your practice.
- **Pick a starting point and commit to trying something both new and measurable.** The first step is not to change *everything*, but to change *something*. After you and your colleagues look at the data, you'll have a better idea of what elements of your instructional practice need to shift, so don't skip the data! Once you pick something you want to try, figure out how you'll know if it's going well or not. Maybe you'll engage in group classroom observations. Maybe you'll develop a short "check for understanding" that you can administer to your classroom after a week. Whatever you decide to do, make sure you can make the adjustment in the following week, and then commit to meeting again with your team to talk about how it went!
- **Reflect on what you learn and adjust accordingly.** Changing practice without reflection ignores one of the most powerful parts of ROCI: the inquiry and learning component. It's rare that an adjustment is perfect and leads to immediate success. Without adequate reflection, we don't refine our practice and might continue down unproductive paths.

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- **Lather, rinse, repeat.** This is where the rubber meets the road. The next time you step in front of your classroom, you're going to do something new—maybe even something you've never done before as an educator. Are you nervous? Good, you should be! Change is hard! Scary, even! But here's a little secret: You know how they always say "failure is not an option"? That's complete BS. Failure is absolutely an option. If we're not failing once in a while, we're not taking enough risks. The goal is not to avoid failure, but to learn from the process of trying something new, even if it doesn't work the first time.

## CHAPTER 1: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt included in the decision-making at your school? How did that feel, and what was the outcome? On the flipside, have you ever felt excluded? What was that like?
2. Is there anything about your school you think needs improving? Do people talk about those issues? Does your school invite difficult conversations or discourage them?
3. Have you ever been able to add a new habit to your routine, either personal or professional? Or have you ever removed a bad habit? What worked and what didn't in that process?