Preface

In today's turbulent world, many of our educational institutions are under fire for not producing results up to par with some of the other nations that we compete with for resources on a global level; as a result, schools face constant pressure to improve (Chenoweth, 2009). It is not that schools are allergic to change, as many researchers have stated; schools are more than willing to change. The issue is that in most cases this change does not lead schools to improved results (Elmore, 2002).

This issue is exacerbated by the fact that schools are flooded with instructional promises or "shiny baubles" that can cause educators to lose focus. In December 2012, a simple Google search for "school improvement resources" yielded 222 million results! With the volume of competing programs and practices available, is it any wonder that many schools find themselves chasing their proverbial tails—especially when the heat is on because of the "stick-and-carrot" accountability systems that are now so powerful?

Many educators feel that we need more "stick," by adding more punitive reactions against schools and districts that are not meeting goals or standards. In many cases, this myth was debunked when some districts that used the "neutron-bomb strategy" (so called because entire staffs were fired) experienced not-so-delightful results or improvements in student achievement.

Others believe that the system needs more "carrot" in the form of merit pay and other incentive programs. The problem with this strategy is that there is no research base that supports a relationship between the implementation of these types of strategies and improved student results. Is it safe to assume that we know what to do to improve schools, and for some reason, we are just not implementing these more effective practices? The question begs an answer from those who would say that the offer of more money is all we need to spur teachers and school leaders to the epiphanies that will lead to increased success.

The proposition of this book is very similar to the quote attributed to Ron Edmonds (1978):

> We can whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

This proposition does not mean that we are condemning all those who may not have 100 percent of their students at proficiency level or above. The idea is that we are unable to see the forest for the trees.

This book asserts that it is *not* the number of initiatives that a school or a district has in place that lead to improved results; it most definitely *is* the quality of the effective practices that the school chooses to make its focus. The bottom line is that the focus has to be on teaching and, even more, on learning. The recommendations in the chapters to come are incessantly fixated not only on student results but also, just as important, on the actions of the adults that lead to these results. It is only when we consider both factors, student results and adult actions, that we can set about the business of realizing the profound impacts on student achievement that we seek (Reeves, 2006).

My goal over the next few chapters is to reflect on the vast amount of research that is now available suggesting that we do currently have knowledge of the structures that we need in order to ensure increased student results. What invariably has led to less than desired results is how we contemplate our work and how these varied and proposed practices fit together. That is the synthesis for *The Focus Model* (TFM), taking what we discover from the latest research and using that knowledge to power up effective practices in the present.

Take some time to consider the ideas and concepts of this book. Give yourself, your district, your school, your staff, and your kids the gift of focus. I do not emphasize a plethora of initiatives in this volume. Primarily, I focus on four key components that comprise TFM. Those four components are *Learning intentions*, *success criteria*, *formative assessment*, and *professional learning communities* (PLCs). You have probably heard the axiom "The people make the difference, not the program." It is the supposition of this book and a preponderance of the research cited over the next few chapters that it is the people doing the things that have the greatest impact that make the difference—and it is that difference that translates into improved results for our students and more satisfying working conditions for our educators.