

that successful and worthy change requires. However, we will not have even an opportunity for successful change if we fail to acknowledge the need for change, establish a solid infrastructure supported by a foundation of trust, and fully commit to the change process.

Become a “Positive Deviant”— A Force for Helpful Change

Over many years, I’ve observed and concluded that one of the most crucial factors—if not the most decisive one—that influences how well students achieve is the *expectations mindset* that we educators hold. I have never been in a school where expectations by the adults are too high. A school culture of low expectations is so pervasive that often we don’t even notice it. Too often we have convinced ourselves that outside factors—not we educators—are responsible for low achievement. Although poverty, crime, inadequate parenting, and a host of society’s ills prevent us from reaching and teaching every student every day, we must try—and continue to try and try again—to do right by and for all our students.

In addition to an excuses-and-deficit mentality that reinforces low expectations, a collective lack of a sense of agency often hampers our efforts; that is, many of us don’t really believe we have the wherewithal to significantly influence student learning and achievement.¹³ In his leading-edge book *Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance*, prominent physician Atul Gawande describes how the outcomes for some intractable diseases have drastically improved through hard-working, informed individuals who possess a mindset that does not accept failure and who work relentlessly to ensure things get better. Gawande uses the phrase “positive deviants” to refer to those who do whatever it takes to “make a worthy difference” and positively change the status quo. I adopt that term for us as committed educators. In schools where all students are viewed as having high learning potential, there is no blame/complain game. Instead, there is a collective, unwavering will and a collaborative effort to do whatever it takes to guarantee that all our students engage in meaningful learning. That collective will includes becoming as knowledgeable as possible about all aspects of literacy, leadership, and learning. Furthermore, worthwhile and sustainable change requires that we educators hold the belief that we have it within our power to positively influence our students’ learning and life destinies. Our first step as educators is to acknowledge that we can do better for those we

Quick Win

Hire teachers who are curious, and assess their willingness to learn more and be part of a continuously learning culture of high expectations and ongoing collaboration. That positive mindset will make it easy for them to quickly adjust.

serve, even when we are teaching under challenging conditions. Despite the presence of real constraints that remain outside our control and that influence our students' ability to engage and achieve, there are actions we can take—individually and collectively—that can positively influence our students' abilities so they enjoy increasing success. First among these is altering our mindset as to what's possible.

Develop a Mindset for High Achievement

Our ability and willingness to see possibilities where adversity and diversity coexist determine how successful we will be as educators. We may care about our students, work hard, and be knowledgeable about literacy, but kindness, hard work, and knowledge do not suffice for raising achievement.

Recently I was at a high-needs school where two 1st grade teachers held very different expectation mindsets about the capability of their students. It was the second month of school, and both teachers had received all their students (with the exception of those new to the school) from the school's only kindergarten teacher, who taught two half-day classes. Although almost all the exiting kindergartners at the school were readers and writers, as confirmed by teacher observation and detailed data, the two 1st grade teachers viewed and perceived this group of students very differently.

One praised the kindergarten teacher and told her how thrilled she was that her job as a 1st grade teacher was much easier because the incoming 1st graders knew all their sounds and letters, formed letters correctly, and could fluently write a page or more of meaningful text. She was excited about how far she would be able to take her students and that she could focus on meaningful content from the start.

The other 1st grade teacher saw her students differently and described their performance as "very low" and as "sweet children with behavior problems." She noted that they could not write well, requiring her to take dictation for some. She was discouraged by how hard she perceived it would be to move her students forward. Although she expressed hope that her students would become better writers and readers, unless she could alter her mindset to a more positive one, her students' literacy progress would be constrained by her low expectations.

The first teacher in this story lived her school life as a positive deviant. She did whatever it took to move her students forward, including advocating for them, partnering her 1st graders with students in an

intermediate-grades class who acted as peer tutors, assessing them day by day to be sure they were moving forward, and refusing to let any political and school issues distract her from a laserlike focus on high literacy achievement for every student. At the end of the school year, most of her 34 students were joyfully reading and writing texts well beyond grade level, as judged by various assessments, including school and district benchmarks and exemplars from the Common Core State Standards, standardized interim writing assessments, everyday reading and writing samples, and student self-assessments. Her high expectations for all children, her sense of agency that she could propel all students forward, and her whole-part-whole, meaningful instruction made excellent results likely, and she got them.

The second teacher worked diligently and had good intentions, but at the end of the school year her students' reading and writing competencies, as a whole, lagged far behind the first teacher's. In spite of her participation in embedded, high-level professional development dedicated to improving student learning, collaborative work across grade levels to develop shared literacy knowledge, a strong and supportive principal and literacy coach, and a school culture of increasing trust, the second teacher was unable to sufficiently modify her expectations mindset in a manner that would help most of her students soar. Her beliefs and low expectations about what her students could and could not accomplish remained static.

So, how do we get all staff members to alter their views for what's possible for students? It's no easy matter, and it starts with changing the culture of the school. By *culture* I mean the trust levels, collaboration, sense of agency and urgency, shared beliefs, knowledge level, feedback, and infrastructure that support high-level, embedded professional development aimed at improving reading and writing achievement across the curriculum, each and every day. By *culture* I also mean determining what kind of change is worthwhile and what mindsets, structures, systems, resources, and practices we need to keep in place, what we need to modify, and what we need to replace. By *culture* I further mean creating a whole-school community that works together to increase effectiveness, efficiency, and enjoyment for teachers, leaders, students, and their families. Much of this book centers on achieving a culture that supports optimal learning.

I have thought a lot about why the second teacher never became part of the school culture of high expectations and why she seemed to lack any

Quick Win

Give a potential hire a professional article to read; then base part of the interview on discussing that noteworthy article, which will give some insight into whether the person is a good fit for the school's learning culture.

sense of urgency. I believe, above all, she lacked the determination, commitment, and curiosity to learn more, which require welcoming divergent conversations and thought as well as openness to doing things differently. Lacking those characteristics herself, she was unable to instill them in her students and thus thwarted their optimal progress.

At a minimum, the interview and hiring process for new teachers and leaders must include, as a crucial component, finding out what the applicant is curious about, is studying, is thinking about, and is hoping to learn. Responses to the questions “What are you reading professionally?” “Who are some of your favorite authors?” “What are you wondering about?” and “What are you passionate about?” can tell us volumes.

Teach with a Sense of Agency and Urgency

A sense of complacency is the air we breathe in too many schools—our low- and high-achieving schools alike. In low-performing schools, we too often accept the fact that students are routinely two and three years below grade level. In high-performing schools where many students may come from affluent backgrounds, teachers often take credit for students' high test scores that may more realistically be the result of the wide literacy and learning opportunities families have provided to their children.

A story comes to mind. When teaching in a residency focused on reading, I was struck by the engagement and curiosity of a 1st grade student who enthusiastically responded to a nonfiction story about dogs of war that I had just read aloud to the class. (The book is *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine and a Miracle*.¹⁴) His participation at all levels—answering thoughtful questions, understanding vocabulary, and contributing to our shared writing summary—stood out among his peers. So I was surprised and disheartened to learn and to observe that this boy was the oldest and most struggling reader in the classroom. Because he did not yet know his letters and sounds, he was pulled out to work with an interventionist 30 minutes a day, during which he was drilled with flash cards and unavailable to benefit from high-quality classroom instruction in language arts.

As an alternative I suggested using vocabulary and pictures from the nonfiction book he appeared to relish—words and phrases such as *Humvee*, *war zone*, and *stray dog*—to teach him his letters and sounds, which I believed he would learn rapidly if meaning were attached to them. I remember feeling outrage that this intelligent boy was not receiving the support

that would propel him forward. His teachers were kind and caring, but they did not yet see this student as highly capable. Moreover, their actions did not indicate an urgent need to hold themselves accountable for his lack of progress or to do whatever it took to ensure his immediate and fast progress as a reader.

Believing we have the wherewithal to increase achievement for all students is a big shift for many of us. As already stated but important enough to be restated, a lack of agency on the part of adults—that is, the belief that we cannot influence the learning and achievement of some of our students—is one of the major factors holding these students back.¹⁵ Additionally, teaching with a sense of urgency is required.

Teaching with a sense of urgency means making every minute count. When teaching with urgency, we teach with a sense of relevancy and purpose, keep most demonstration lessons to 10 to 15 minutes, adjust our pacing, assess as we teach, and constantly rethink and revise as we go along. Teaching with urgency does not mean rushing through lessons; it does mean being mindful that how and what we are teaching in every instructional moment is worthwhile for our students. *We're not in a race to the top; we're on a journey to excellence.*

Ask Uncommon Questions

The questions we ask ourselves while planning, teaching, assessing, and reflecting show what we value, and ultimately those questions play a large part in determining our effectiveness as educators and “positive deviants.” By effectiveness, I mean the beneficial and lasting influence and effect we are able to have on student engagement, learning, and achievement. That effectiveness does not come about through strict adherence to a particular learning target, standard, program, or set of criteria. The latter are important, of course, and can help us become more intentional and specific in our teaching and leading. However, the learning targets and objectives must not supersede our primary emphasis: the mental and emotional well-being and growth of our students. I believe that highly effective teachers ask different questions than typical teachers do—before, during, and after instruction. In fact, we are constantly questioning everything we do: *Why does this matter? Could it be otherwise? What other considerations are necessary? Is there a better way? How could we do this differently and more effectively?*

Before I teach literacy in any school residency, I spend many hours thinking and planning, on my own and with the teacher in whose classroom I will be demonstrating and coaching. Although I always have the curriculum, standards, and specific learning goals in mind, the students take precedence over those, and my primary planning questions to myself run along these lines:

- What topic, actions, and activities will fully engage the hearts and minds of the students so they will invest their full energies?
- What outstanding and relevant literature and resources will inspire and inform the students through rich language and ideas from various authors, genres, and formats?
- How can we best support all students to move their learning forward and encourage their success and independence?
- How will we know students are understanding and learning what we are teaching?

Some administrators and teachers complain they get “push back” if they try to deviate in any way from standard protocols and required resources. However, focusing on particular standards, learning targets, and outcomes does not guarantee a positive effect on student learning. As one principal from Wisconsin wrote to me:

Requiring teachers to rigidly adhere to a prescribed protocol for instruction can leach the life out of what makes learning so enjoyable: the interactions between teacher-student, student-student, and classroom-global community.¹⁶

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about, taken from my work with the members of a K–12 school team who were committed to doing better for their mostly underachieving students in a large urban district. The leaders and teachers proudly described how anyone could walk into any classroom and know immediately by what’s posted on the walls exactly what standard and learning outcome every teacher was focused on for that day. In particular, they took great pride in the standardization they had achieved; that is, all teachers at a grade level were working on the same goal. However, when I asked, “How is that working for you? Is student achievement going up?” they responded that a large proportion of students were still one to three years below grade level.

And here's another example. Recently an elementary coordinator wrote me of her concern that the district leadership expects teachers to know exactly what the learning target is for every learning task and to have those posted. Yet the same teachers do not know what knowledge their students possess or lack, and the teachers are not highly skilled in assessing their students or in knowing how to give effective feedback. This all too common practice of following procedures, standards, and resources without question, which can sound good and look impressive on the surface, may do considerable harm to students by taking the focus away from their most pressing learning needs and interests. We have only so much time, and we must apportion it wisely.

There is a big difference between posting clear learning goals (perhaps as "I Can" statements) and simply copying something from the district pacing guide. Learning goals can be linked to district and state standards, as well as student needs, but we educators have to be both knowledgeable and articulate to use learning goals so they actually help students learn more.

Keep in mind that in our role as positive deviants—that is, as productive teachers and leaders who put students at the forefront of all we do—we must advocate for and behave with a mindset that puts students first. That means asking questions that are uncommon for some of us as educators.

Uncommon Questions

- What do we really need to be doing, saying, and providing to ensure students understand, value, and can apply the academic expectations we set for and with them?
- What are we doing, saying, and providing that may work against optimal student learning?
- Are we emphasizing the wrong end goal(s)?
- Are we overly focused or overly invested in a structure, a process, standards, or a program?
- What might we do differently?
- What else do we need to consider?
- Are we succumbing to "group think" and failing to consider important alternatives?
- Does our instructional emphasis build on the student's self-esteem, transferable knowledge, and self-monitoring abilities?

Instead of thinking first about naming and posting learning targets, think first about making worthwhile learning visible, explicit, and comprehensible for students. We can, in fact, teach our colleagues and ourselves how to think, question, and teach more responsively. We must ensure that we are doing enough excellent demonstrating for learners—for example, through our explanations and thinking aloud, which show exactly what we expect students to be trying and applying in their own work. In addition, we must provide sufficient shared experiences and guided practice if we expect learners to be successful. Once we as educators are highly knowledgeable and are clear and articulate in our instructional intentions, posted learning targets can become somewhat redundant. At this point, we can find out what students are learning and why they are learning it by asking them.

Become a Teacher Who Also Leads

At schools where teachers are expert at their craft and students are high achieving, those teachers are also, almost always, teacher-leaders. To be clear, we are not talking about those teachers whose goal is to move into administration. A teacher-leader's primary job is still as a teacher of a group of students, but the job goes far beyond the classroom walls. It means seeing ourselves as concerned for all the school's students and being willing to share what we know, coach and coteach, help implement new initiatives, partner with teachers who may be at a different grade level, set up unconventional learning situations, speak up honestly in meetings when it's important to do so, and keep the good of the whole school uppermost in all our actions. Much of this book is about becoming a highly effective teacher who also leads, which is a necessity for raising and sustaining achievement schoolwide.

Becoming a teacher-leader requires extensive knowledge of relevant research and best practices and how to apply that knowledge in the classroom, superb skills in communicating and working with others, a mindset that puts students before standards, plus courage and stamina. That is, these are teachers who are willing to share what they know, collaborate with others, stretch their thinking, stand by their principles, advocate for their students, and see themselves and their work as part of a larger school purpose. Becoming a teacher-leader also means being willing to step outside our comfort zones and outside our classrooms. It means questioning the status quo when necessary, checking the research to ensure it applies to

Quick Win

Dress for success.
The way we present ourselves sends a message to students and the public about our pride in our profession.

our specific population and context, looking carefully at the data and using them to improve learning, and suggesting and advocating for alternative approaches when necessary.

It can be difficult to take a stand on established policies that are harmful to the teaching profession and ultimately to our students' achievement and well-being, but sometimes there's no one else to do it, and we have to at least try. Jonathan Kozol wisely states, "Look for battles big enough to matter but, at the same time, small enough to win some realistic victories."¹⁷ We'll never know if we can win an important battle or a small victory unless we confront the issues in a constructive manner and offer alternative actions.

An example of a courageous teacher-leader is Lori Johnson. When her district became overinvested in an evaluation program that was yielding numerical data that were not useful for improving reading instruction, she lobbied her superintendent, led the formation of a district advisory group, and caused the district to take another look at the program that was taking too much time away from instruction and that did not support what Lori knew and practiced regarding excellent reading instruction. She did all this in a highly professional and positive manner while recognizing and affirming district leaders and their intentions. The result of her unrelenting efforts—which was possible in no small measure because of the ongoing moral support of her principal, DeAnna Finger—was that her school was granted flexibility with how to use the required assessment. Like many teacher-leaders, Lori was a reluctant one. She did not start out seeking to be a leader. She felt compelled to speak out and take action because of what she believed—from years of professional study and teaching experience—her students most needed to develop as readers.

Here's another example. Sharline Markwardt is an English language development (ELD) teacher who took a stand and lobbied her district for a "push-in" model rather than the traditional "pull-out" model for second-language learners. She invited her principal and the district's director of curriculum and instruction to observe firsthand the results she was getting when she supported her English language learners (ELLs) in the regular classroom, and those results included impressive data.

Working closely with the classroom teacher, Sharline differentiated the curriculum all students were receiving to scaffold the learning for her English language learners. Not only was she then able to change the model

at her own school, but she also convinced the district to change the model in every school. She offered and followed through on mentoring ELD teachers in other buildings by inviting them to observe her teach, debrief through professional conversations, and follow up with districtwide professional development. Sharlline notes:

I knew something had to change, that what we were doing wasn't working. In looking at the whole-part-whole model, I realized that teaching ELD in a pull-out was about teaching just parts and not wholes. A classroom teacher took a chance on me and my idea of doing a language assessment on her whole class. What we found was that all of the non-ELD students scored somewhere on the language acquisition range, so we took the plunge, with administration support, and implemented ELD within content area teaching. The results have proven to be not just positive for ELD students, but the non-ELD students' writing improved as well.¹⁸

Becoming a teacher-leader also means speaking with clarity and knowledge, and communicating and collaborating in a respectful and effective manner. The teacher-leader who is able to be a force for positive change strives for a mindset of "we-we," not "we-they," and recognizes that all of us want students to succeed even if our means to that success differ. It is our close relationships with other teachers and administrators that give us our political power to make change. I have never seen a teacher who maintains low expectations for students or poor relationships with peers and administrators rise to become a leader who makes a positive and lasting impact in a school or district.

Perhaps most of all, we need to stay focused on solutions, stay upbeat (become a positive deviant), see our colleagues positively and as having good intentions, continue to generously share ideas, and listen to others with an open mind. Laurie Espenel is a teacher-leader who possesses all of these characteristics, along with being an excellent communicator. Having a strong relationship with her principal enabled Laurie to serve as a positive buffer and an advocate for both the principal and the teachers. In speaking of her role as teacher-leader, Laurie says:

It's a role I come by naturally. I've never been afraid to bring up an issue that needed resolution. Also, the staff trusted me. I knew the feelings of much of the staff. Taking on the role of teacher-leader opened the

principal's door wider so there's better communication. The principal was more accessible because teachers' concerns were addressed in a way that made them feel they were being heard.¹⁹

Become a Leader Who Also Knows Literacy

My biggest learning lesson in working in diverse schools for the last two decades is this: *Teachers have to be leaders, and leaders have to know literacy.* I learned this lesson the hard way when, after focusing all my residency efforts on working with teachers, I realized the principal often did not know how to fully support teachers—what to look for in the reading-writing classroom, what to say to teachers to help them move forward, and most of all, what highly effective literacy instruction, learning, and assessment entailed. Although I had been demonstrating effective reading and writing practices with students in classrooms and then coaching teachers to take on that responsibility, I realized that nothing of significance would be sustained schoolwide until the principal could assume the role of effective literacy coach as part of being a strong leader.

A principal cannot bring a whole school of teachers from good to great without becoming a highly knowledgeable literacy expert, as well as a trusted leader and colleague. Without the principal knowing what's most important to look for and listen for in the literacy classroom and how to give honest and useful feedback and support to teachers, teachers and students won't improve much in ways that matter.

Barb Ide, a former elementary and middle school principal who works as a school improvement coach in a high-poverty urban school, is an excellent example of a principal who greatly increased her effectiveness when she expanded her leadership role to include literacy. She talks about how that increased knowledge—along with learning how to better support, trust, and communicate with her staff—changed things for teachers, students, the school, and herself as a leader:

A new leader going into a successful school needs to observe and pay attention to the established culture. I followed this protocol in my first two schools, and it was a good decision! At my next school, I was sent in as a change agent and made a mess of things because I was accustomed to collaboration and trust. When some of the faculty met me with suspicion and resistance, I reacted with a heavy hand. I made a

rookie mistake by hearing only the contrary minority rather than seeking out the innovators and prospective leaders. After a couple of difficult years I shifted to a focus on literacy and delighted in our staff as we combined effort for positive change. An indicator of progress over the seven years at that school was the number of teacher-leaders who emerged, due in part to the literacy experience anchored in a culture of trust. Nearly a dozen future principals, assistant principals, and literacy coaches spread their wings with first-hand knowledge of the power of curriculum teams (PLCs) guided by a schoolwide focus.²⁰

Sustainable, worthwhile change in our schools is not easy, but it is possible and necessary if we are to serve our students well and fairly. A premise of this book is that it is all of us working together as smart, inquiring, trusting educators with our primary focus on deep knowledge of literacy, instruction, assessment, and learning—not the latest standards, curriculum, evaluations, or tests—that matters most. For the high achievement, engagement, and joy in learning we all seek, not just for our students but for ourselves as well, it *is* within our power to make a worthy and lasting difference.