Foreword

Tony Wagner

Edie Holcomb has written a wise and exceptionally user-friendly book—now made even more so in this updated and expanded second edition. She clearly communicates the importance of using a variety of student data to guide both school and district improvement, and she provides a wealth of valuable advice, strategies, and tools for engaging adults in the discussion and use of data in a nonthreatening environment. Edie's book should be on the shelf of every school administrator and teacher leader in America—not for show, but rather as the first tool to reach for in the change process.

Data helps us do many things in schools: understand where we are, define where we want and need to go, measure progress along the way. It is indispensable information that is best used internally, as Edie stresses, for the development of shared accountability. Sadly, most of our use of student and school data in America today is punitive, not informative. Data is used by politicians and the media to decry the "failure" of our public schools, to ferret out "underperforming schools," and, increasingly, to impose harsh sanctions on students, teachers, and schools who do not "measure up" or "make adequate yearly progress."

Using data in this fashion as a crude device for imposing summary judgment creates a climate of fear and victimization, and it is unlikely to produce the desired improvements. More and more students, who are required to pass high-stakes tests for promotion or graduation, talk about how they've grown to dislike school, with the unrelenting focus on test preparation and the intense anxiety that the tests engender. With the increasing frequency of tests and severity of the sanctions for "failure," the dropout rate has steadily increased in many districts. Teachers, too, feel victimized, because they are being held accountable for increasing student achievement and, in most cases, do not know what they should do differently to get better results. The fallback position for many is to blame the parents for poor student performance—or to retire early. Meanwhile, after nearly a decade of increased emphasis on accountability, reading and

writing scores for secondary students continue to decline while elementary scores are up only marginally, according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests.

The heart of the problem is that we do not know how to educate all students to the new higher learning standards now required for learning, work, and citizenship in a so-called knowledge society. It's not as if we once knew how to do this and forgot or got lazy—it's not a matter of "failure." The challenge, as Edie and I both see it, is to create new knowledge about how to systemically improve teaching and learning for all students. More testing does not necessarily improve teaching. Improvement efforts, driven by data, are essential, but we must understand more clearly all of the steps required for raising the level of instruction in *every* classroom.

My colleagues and I at Change Leadership Group in Harvard's Graduate School of Education work with change leaders to improve their effectiveness at implementing systemic improvements in their schools and districts. As a part of this effort, we've researched strategies for improving teaching in those districts that have dramatically raised the level of student achievement for the lowest quartile of students—including those from the most at-risk populations—and have identified seven practices that appear to be central to any successful effort at instructional improvement. What we call "The 7 Core Tasks for Improving Teaching and Learning" should not be seen as a blueprint, but rather as an outline of both a process and a description of a set of intermediate goals that are most likely to significantly improve student achievement. They are listed briefly below, and, beginning with the graphic organizer in Chapter 1 of *Getting Excited About Data*, Edie provides guidance that will support schools and districts in replicating these core practices:

1. The district/school creates *understanding and urgency* around improving *all* students' learning for teachers and community, and they regularly report on progress. Data is disaggregated and transparent to everyone. Qualitative data (e.g., focus groups and interviews) as well as quantitative data are used to understand students' and recent graduates' experience of school.

2. There is *a widely shared vision of what good teaching is*, which is focused on rigor, the quality of student engagement, and effective methods for personalizing learning for all students.

3. *All adult meetings are about instruction* and are models of good teaching.

4. *There are well-defined standards and performance assessments for student work* at all grade levels. Both teachers and students understand what quality work looks like, and there is consistency in standards of assessment.

5. *Supervision is frequent, rigorous, and entirely focused on the improvement of instruction.*

6. *Professional development is primarily on-site, intensive, collaborative, and job-embedded and is designed and led by educators who model best teaching and learning practices.*

7. *Teams of teachers use data diagnostically at frequent intervals to assess each student's learning and to identify the most effective teaching practices.* They have time built into their schedules for this shared work.

We at Change Leadership Group have learned that these 7 Core Tasks are not a "buffet," from which a district can choose one or two for implementation without regard to the others. Rather, they represent an interdependent systems approach to the improvement of instruction. While not all may be implemented at once, none can be skipped. For example, few may feel the need to define good teaching if there is no urgency for change. Moreover, definitions of good teaching are incomplete if they do not include data about student work. Finally, effective supervision requires a shared vision of good teaching and standards for student work and is driven by a variety of informative data. This same data also informs planning for effective professional development and the content of school and district meetings.

In the analysis of high-performing schools and districts, use of data comes up again and again. *Getting Excited About Data* is an indispensable guidebook for navigating this new and vital world of shared accountability for the learning of all our students.

Tony is currently Co-Director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His most recent book, *Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools*, has just been released in paperback by RoutledgeFalmer. Tony can be reached through his Web site, www .newvillageschools.org.