

Preface

This book was born out of the frustrations I share with educators across the country regarding the limited success of the high school improvement process. *Battling the Hamster Wheel* introduces you to scenarios typical of schools in the throes of change and to my personal dilemma as an educator and consultant: how to help push a faculty past the point where they are spinning their wheels, going nowhere. As you will see, the idea for this book came in a thunderclap moment. The image was clear! Hardworking committee members, albeit well-intentioned, were like hamsters, running hard on their wheel and making no progress. What made the moment worse for me was that I realized I had jumped up on the wheel with them! *Whirr! Whirr! Whirr!*

As an educator, school reformer, consultant, speaker, and author, I have now spent nearly 20 years working in what I consider to be one of this country's most challenging institutions, the American high school. Over time, working in 32 states, like many of you, I have seen reform initiatives come and go. I have witnessed and partnered with educators working hard and meeting with varying levels of success. I have had the great privilege of participating in the national debate focusing on the status of the American high school. It is clear that at no time in the history of education have the stakes been raised so high—to educate *all* of America's children.

Educators at the federal, state, district, school, and classroom level, as well as researchers, technical assistance providers, and community groups, are all grappling with how to make their reform initiatives work. Gates, Carnegie, Annenberg, Kellogg, and an array of other national and local funders are pumping billions of dollars into high schools. The U.S. Department of Education has already released more than \$647 million specifically to address the redesign of high schools into smaller learning communities.

Educators are working as hard as they can, but too often they are engaged in a system that nurtures a carousel cycle of reforms that inhibits

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them from making the progress the reforms seek to attain. Teachers are deeply committed to student success. However, many are working in systems that do not provide a framework that allows them to excel at the craft of teaching *today's* students. Schools are suffering from what Arnold Fege, director of Public Engagement for the Public Education Network, calls "innovation fatigue." As schools fight for reform, they are grappling with a challenge that makes them feel that perhaps all students can't learn and maybe all schools can't succeed. They enter into a cycle that lowers their expectations for success and maintains the status quo of poor outcomes for too many of our students. The belief systems, the practices and policies, and the automatic responses that make up high school culture have not helped schools meet with success.

I have worked in urban, suburban, rural, and Indian nation schools. Regardless of the venue, the questions are the same: how do we increase achievement, increase personalization, develop professional communities, and create successful learning environments for our students? The available research, data, and documented best practices provide straightforward answers, especially for our most challenged schools. However, the culture of schools, particularly high schools, has made them increasingly resistant to change.

Half of our nation's African American student population, 40% of our Latino student population, and 11% of our white student population attend high schools where graduation is not the norm. One in 20 high school students nationally do not finish high school, and 40% of those entering college need remediation. Twenty-three of the 30 fastest growing job areas require a college degree. We can no longer, if we ever could, stand by and not wrestle with the very difficult issues of why we are not succeeding for all students.

Hamster Wheel argues that the data, the students, and our own observations tell us that we need a solid, systemic approach to effective reform. This reform begins with a commitment to continuous improvement of educational practice that will require constant change, knowing and using our data, moving us to a clear mission, and developing the capacity of the educators and community leaders to meet with success. We're all working as hard as we can. We are balancing multiple, and sometimes competing, demands and initiatives. We want our organizations to meet with success, but all too often we are working in an environment that puts us on a "hamster wheel." Like those cute little pets that spend their lives running in place and jumping on and off their wheels, we are running as fast as we can on a wheel; we are not on a road to success.

My message is a hard one to hear and acknowledge. We're collectively failing too many of our students and our communities. We are stuck in a cycle that enables us to continue that pattern. However, I have found through working with schools that care about their work, through research, and by listening to students, that there is hope. Educational research, proven practices in organizational management, and a commitment to real outcomes for students provide what we need to set a mission and build the capacity of all involved.

Hamster Wheel is a tool for change. It speaks to the urgent need for schools to ask and answer hard questions. It takes a comprehensive look at the data and provides schools with the mettle to refine their mission, develop strong leaders, focus on their own data, and build a community that succeeds for students and faculty alike. The study guide at the end of the book is intended to help thoughtful faculties, educators, and those who work with them ask and answer the hard questions that must be wrestled with if the goals of our intended reforms are going to be met.

Join me and a "Noah's Ark" of characters as we confront the struggles surrounding high school reform and the all-too-present set of low expectations and acceptance of the status quo evidenced in too many of our schools. With metaphors, humor, wit, and true stories from the field, we will take a sobering look at America's high schools. Backed by research and proven best practices we will uncover the truths of the hamster wheel and, more important, how to get off it!

—Grace Sammon
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