

# Foreword

Michael Fullan gave us *The Right Drivers*. Roland Barth likened leadership to sailing. Dennis Shirley and I set out *The Fourth Way* of educational change. Great leaders, and leaders of leaders, understand that a significant element of effective leadership involves describing an important and even epic journey we must all undertake to escape from darkness, bondage, or any other existential threat to reach a better place together. Whether it's *The Greek Odyssey*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, or the animated children's movie, *Moana*, narratives of epic journeys describe how a group can seek and reach a better life together despite obstacles that might get in the way and distractions that can easily take them off course.

In this book, Patricia Wright and her colleagues use another quest-like metaphor, *The Connected Action Roadmap*, or CAR, to show how schools can bring about school improvement and transformation that can benefit all students everywhere. Once you are in the CAR, they show, you will need a driver, a GPS and all the other tools that will help you find your way and reach your destination. As you read this big educational road trip of a book, you'll also learn it has a great soundtrack—key ideas, and inspiring quotes from some of the leading thinkers in teaching, learning, assessment, leadership, and change.

The CAR is a big-picture roadmap, but it also has a very detailed cartographic legend. This is set out in clear guides for constructive conversations about specific practices, such as unpacking standards, or identifying norms for effective collaboration. CAR alerts you not to get distracted by dysfunctional routines such as allowing bad behavior to pass without comment and not to become prey to the siren-like seductions of deceptively alluring workshop presentations.

Who wants a big-picture book now, even if it does have lots of tools and guidelines too? We're just coming out of a pandemic, hopefully. Teachers and leaders are struggling just to get normal classroom life going without masks and interruptions. Why don't we just all get on with the jobs that were stolen from us and leave all this blue-sky thinking until later?

Let me explain why by pointing out the impact and implications of just four things that are occupying my mind and my time on Valentine's Day, 2022.

First, my city of Ottawa, the capital of Canada, is under occupation by thousands of demonstrators in trucks and other vehicles, ostensibly protesting vaccine mandates,

even though the plan was first constructed on Facebook in 2019! Nazi and confederate flags have been flown, local residents have been abused, the national war memorial has been desecrated, and saunas and dance stages have been set up outside parliament. There has been no significant police intervention, in the hope that it might all dissipate spontaneously. It didn't, though, because in this nation's capital, just like any junior high school, bad behavior doesn't terminate itself. And so now, for the first time in Canadian history, the Emergency Powers Act has been invoked. Democracy, civility, decency, and community are all in peril, even in Canada—reminding us that democracy does not take care of itself. The world is falling off its axis, and how we educate our young, and with what purpose, beyond basics and test scores, is a huge part of that. The big picture of where we are all headed is no longer just the concern of intellectuals and media pundits; it's everyone's problem now.

Second, I am preparing to address a national task force that has been convened by the American Federation of Teachers, to address the future of teaching at a time of massive problems of recruitment and retention in the profession. Teachers are worn out. Many are leaving and taking their skills to higher paid jobs in the economy elsewhere. Teachers are part of COVID-19's Great Resignation. What might turn things around? Higher pay will help, as will proper professional certification. But a few mindfulness seminars, yoga sessions, or days devoted to social and emotional learning for teachers almost certainly won't. Teachers will stay in teaching when the work feels better, when they are not micromanaged, when they have more autonomy over their own judgments, when they have more time for the authentic collegiality described in this book, and when they don't have to teach things that they don't believe in for high stakes tests that have little educational value. The culture of collegiality, of PLCs that fosters inspiring and instructive conversations that improve practice, are a vital part of the CAR.

Third, COVID-19 has had some terrible consequences for our schools and our kids in terms of lost learning and damaged well-being. Yet it has also shone a light on the possibility that things can be better once COVID-19 is truly over. I'm in the middle of reviewing the Irish education system and its handling of assessment changes during the pandemic, and it's clear that we have all learned a lot. We've learned that change can be quick. It doesn't always have to be slow. Teachers have picked up new digital skills, including ones that involve new ways of providing assessment and feedback. State after state in the United States is now considering whether it is finally time to abandon high stakes standardized achievement tests in favor of better forms of assessment of the kind described by this book's authors. Teachers have collaborated more than they used to, because the moral imperative of pandemic circumstances, not the mandates of governments and administrators, have forced them to—and more widespread, authentic forms of collaborative professionalism are now within our grasp. Parents have also watched educators teach online, almost every day in some cases, and they are not going to want to be returned to two meetings a year in a gymnasium with their teenagers' teachers. Everything we thought couldn't be changed is suddenly up for grabs. The big picture belongs to all of us. It's time to dream big and act boldly together.

Last, in the depths of the pandemic, seven colleagues and I at the University of Ottawa, felt that people needed an uplifting narrative and journey of learning,

well-being and change as we emerged from the pandemic. So, with the help of \$2.7m from the LEGO Foundation, we are constructing a national network of 40 schools using play-based learning, outdoors, on screen, and/or in makerspaces (green, screen, and machine), beyond Grade 3, with high needs populations, to get students re-engaged, and, in some cases, engaged for the first time, with their learning, in powerful ways. In each participating province (the Canadian equivalent of a state), six diverse schools will be connected to a senior system leader, embedding the networks within policy. It's a strategy to develop creativity, but it's also a creative way to rethink policy. It's all about coherence, as this book's authors would say, without top-down alignment.

Coming out of a crisis is a time to do more than breathe a sigh of relief. It's a time to rethink our work and our lives, to take responsibility for the big picture rather than just tweaking things we think are otherwise out of our control. It's about working with each other for a common good rather than having politicians and administrators constantly telling us what to do. And it's about acting quickly, changing fast, and getting from talk into action with a collective sense of urgency.

We're in the *Amazing Race* for better schools in a better world. It's a race with roadblocks and detours, for sure. But it's also a race that will only have value if there are no eliminations, and if everyone stays in and with their CAR until the very end.

This book is not pie in the sky. It's about making every educator a systems thinker and a systems doer. As the interim superintendent of a public school district is quoted as saying: "Rather than looking at work on many different priorities as new initiatives, the CAR framework connects them altogether into one cohesive framework to drive school improvement efforts." If we don't pull together, now more than ever, things will simply fall apart. Reintroduced mandates will suck the life out of teaching. Conversations will drift into thin air. Teachers' disrupted lives have shown them that other rewarding work options are out there. We need to work to re-engage our students, and we need to re-engage our teachers too. Working in a system that is mission-driven, coherent, and collaboratively developed will create a job that makes sense, provides pleasure, and has a rewarding impact. The CAR framework will help everyone reading this book to get to that very special place.

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February 2022