

The Classroom Cage

PHIL: What would you do if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?

RALPH: That about sums it up for me.

—*Groundhog Day*

Lift up your eyes upon
 The day breaking for you . . .
 The horizon leans forward,
 Offering you space to place new steps of change.

—MAYA ANGELOU, *On the Pulse of Morning*

OVER THE YEARS, I've seen accomplished teachers take pride in doing things the hard way. They talk of working late, planning intricate trips, and writing a slew of micro grants. They're changing lives, there's no doubt about *that*. But they're doing it on their own, because so many see their schools and systems as unhelpful or even as obstacles that drain their time, passion, and energy.

Teachers have responded by taking refuge in their classrooms. They seek to excel *despite* their schools and systems. They do it on their own time and their own dime, seemingly accepting that as their lot in life. I don't think they should, and I don't think they need to. This is a book for those who agree.

Terrific teachers can grow so used to the way things are that they don't even see the problem. Dysfunction can come to seem normal, hard to change, and therefore not worth worrying about. This approach might pass muster if teachers were independent operators, like a psychiatrist with a home office. But they aren't. Their classrooms are part of a larger school, and what happens there has a profound effect—for good or ill—on what happens once their doors are closed.

There are big problems with retreating to the classroom and closing the door. It forces passionate teachers to wear themselves out. It makes it brutally difficult for mere mortals to be successful. An isolated teacher's impact is limited, absent support from the larger school. And it's just not that much fun for teachers to spend their time, passion, and energy battling "the system"—especially when great schools and systems can *amplify* their best work.

Teachers work in a world where administrators, union negotiators, and lawmakers decide how many minutes they have for instruction, how many students they teach, which instructional materials they use, when an assembly or announcement will interrupt class, what kinds of technology they get, how often they'll assess students, what kind of professional development they'll receive, and even when they can eat lunch or go to the restroom. Teachers can feel like decisions are being made by those who don't understand teaching or learning.

That's a little bit nuts. After all, the right school norms, colleagues, and culture can help turn an okay teacher into a terrific one, and the wrong setting can undermine even the most polished practitioner. This isn't unique to education. The same is true for professors, football players, and Marines. We're all made better or worse by our workplaces and colleagues. And educators have much more power than they may realize to bust out of their classroom cage and change the schools and systems in which they work.

A few readers may take issue with the notion of the "cage." One award-winning teacher told me, "I think describing the classroom as a 'cage' is so negative! I don't think it's good for any of us to start from the negative." Fair enough. However, of the hundreds of teachers I interviewed for this book, no one else took offense. Indeed, many embraced the metaphor,

seeming relieved to be reassured that they're not the only one who feels this way and *that perhaps something can be done about it.*

WHAT IS THE "CAGE"?

The cage consists of the routines, rules, and habits that exhaust teachers' time, passion, and energy. The cage is why educators close their classroom doors and keep their heads down. So, what does this cage look like?

Peggy Stewart taught high school social studies in Vernon Township, New Jersey, when she was named the state's Teacher of the Year in 2005. After that stint, with the backing of a supportive superintendent, she spent five years attracting funds to develop new programs. She launched a school-wide Model United Nations program with grants funding student travel to Pakistan and China. Stewart says, "We did a graduation ceremony on the Great Wall of China because our kids didn't want to miss the program—even for graduation. My principal left me alone. He would joke, 'I don't care what you do, Stewart, just don't interfere with my golf game.'" Then the superintendent left, "and the new administration did not welcome any of this. The programs that we had started were disbanded. Teachers were relocated to other buildings." Her principal told her, "Sorry, but I can't help you. I'm taking flak." Stewart says, "We had contractual time after school on Mondays; we'd used that time to design our programs. We were told we could no longer meet at that time." After a year, Stewart left the district. Two years later, so did the superintendent. That's the cage—when everything a teacher has built can be undone by administrative churn.

Madaline Edison founded Educators 4 Excellence Minnesota because, as a first grade teacher, she saw that she could work her tail off and still know that her students "were sort of doomed to fail because the system was set up to fail them." In her third year, she started talking to some veteran colleagues and saying, "We're a small charter school. We can change things up. We need to get an evaluation system in place. We need professional development based on student achievement data. How do we do this?" She recalls, "Basically, what they told me was, 'Get used to it, kid. That's not within our purview. Stay in your lane. It's going to drive you crazy if you

try to work on all of these things that are outside your classroom.’ It got me thinking. These veteran teachers were amazing, they were doing great things with their kids every day in their classes, but they felt helpless to change these bigger systems—even at our small charter school.” That’s the cage—when even talented teachers wearily warn young colleagues to “stay in your lane.”

Ashley Monteil, Houston’s Teacher of the Year in 2012, thought she had a pretty good deal. She taught fourth grade in a Blue Ribbon elementary school and had a principal she liked. Still, it took her three years to summon the courage to offer suggestions to her principal. Once she did, they were consistently shot down. Ideas for tutoring, departmentalization, role changes all were dismissed. Monteil says, “The principal would keep explaining that you don’t mess with a successful school.” She says, “We were doing well, but we could have been doing much, much better. We had huge room for growth.” Monteil finally threw in the towel; she left to become an assistant principal at a local charter school. That’s the cage—when teachers find that sensible ideas are dismissed because a school is “successful enough.”

Finn Laursen, a teacher and administrator for more than four decades, says, “I hear continually, ‘I’m all alone in my room, and nobody is asking what I think, nobody cares, and nobody’s listening.’ There’s this amazing feeling of isolation, in frozen forty-five-minute segments.” Michelle Colly, author of *Everyday Teacher Leadership*, observes, “School cultures and physical structures—from policies that forbid teachers to leave their classrooms unsupervised to the long hallways . . . [mean that just] talking with a colleague during the day can be an accomplishment.”¹ National Education Association (NEA) president Lily Eskelsen García says, “Once you leave the confines of your room and go out into your hallways, you become undocumented and the border patrol is looking for you.” In *The First Days of School*, Harry Wong notes, “Teacher isolation is a reality. Many teachers become comfortable in their isolation.”² That’s the cage—professionals working in a culture of abject isolation.

Stacey Holmes taught English in the largest high school in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Holmes laments, “It felt like the school was focused on pushing kids through and making it look like things were okay.” She says that

several members of the English department thought things needed to change, “So one day, the four of us decided to send an e-mail to the department, saying, ‘Do you guys want to stay after school one day, clean out the English office, and talk about getting the curriculum in order? If so, let’s start meeting every Tuesday.’ It was clearly voluntary. My colleagues asked me to send the e-mail. The next thing I know I’m in the principal’s office for threatening the department leadership. And none of the teachers spoke up, because they were scared. My assistant principal called me in and said, ‘Look, I really like you, so I’m just going to say something. You gotta shut up. Until you’re tenured, I don’t even want to know your name. Shut your door, shut your mouth, and just teach your kids.’” That’s the cage—getting reprimanded for trying to do more because you haven’t waited your turn long enough.

Alex Lopes was Florida’s Teacher of the Year in 2013. The state’s new evaluation system mandated that 50 percent of a teacher’s evaluation be based on student achievement, with teachers in nontested grades scored using schoolwide achievement. As a preschool autism teacher, Lopes had no tested students; thus, he was judged using schoolwide results from his high-poverty, low-performing school. His score was predictably poor. He was labeled ineffective and rendered ineligible for teacher leadership roles. Now, no one meant for this to happen. But no one prevented it, either. That’s the cage—stupid policies that have destructive effects that no one intended.³

When Joiselle Cunningham began teaching at a struggling school in New York City, she led a team that hustled to raise \$100,000 in grants for English language learners. She later earned teaching awards and national recognition for her work. For all that, when she wanted to hold afterschool tutoring sessions for her kids, she was told, “Nope”—an administrator needed to be in the building when students were present, and that wasn’t in the cards. Cunningham responded by working even longer hours and “making home visits, setting up appointments at the public library, McDonald’s, wherever.” Her passion was inspiring, and won her several honors, but she still found herself working harder and harder to compensate for administrators refusing to rethink their routines. That’s the cage—teachers wearing themselves out to make up for obdurate administrators.

THE BARS OF THE CAGE

The cage is all those accumulated rules and routines that waste teacher time, passion, and energy. But it's useful to take a moment to consider some bars in that cage a bit more fully, because seeing the cage clearly is essential if teachers are to escape it.

An "Overflowing Bucket" of Well-Intentioned Directives

Well-intentioned lawmakers and leaders produce a hail of rules, regulations, laws, and directives that rain down on teachers. Seemingly reasonable directives can combine to breed confusion and paralysis. Sharon Gallagher-Fishbaugh, president of the Utah Education Association, sighs, "This year, the legislature proposed 148 bills that would affect schools. Eighty passed. They included a parental bill of rights, testing mandates, suicide prevention, and sexual abuse curricula. Many are good ideas, but they all require time. How much can we pack into a year? You have well-intentioned people pouring raindrops into a bucket, and the bucket is overflowing with new policies. You wind up doing a bit of everything, but none of it very well."

Utah is no anomaly. In 2013, state legislatures approved 1,105 new education bills. In 2012, they enacted 1,345.⁴ I think of the Texas school leader lamenting to me in 2014, "I'm in my eighth year as a principal, and I've never had the same accountability rules for two years in a row." Even if administrators are aware of all this, no one owns the resulting mess. This is hardly a new phenomenon. Tom Loveless, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, recalls teaching in California in the 1980s when the special *The Day After* showed on TV. Portraying the aftereffects of a nuclear strike on Kansas City, the show was a national sensation. Shortly after, the California legislature passed a new requirement that schools "spend two hours a year teaching nuclear awareness." Each new directive can seem innocuous enough, but the result can leave teachers feeling stretched and overwhelmed.

Teachers Have Their Time Casually Wasted

Sarah DuPre taught first grade in rural Mississippi. She says, "I tried to account for every minute, including bathroom and water breaks. [But] ev-

ery day, I'd be hit with last-minute disruptions, so we'd never keep to the schedule. Some days we'd make it to the 10:35 lunch on track, then I'd be called into a last-minute IEP meeting, where I'd be lectured for being late—even though I'd only just learned about the meeting and had to dash out in the middle of my math lesson. An afternoon assembly would run an hour longer than expected, so forget science. Or the extension teacher would be absent and the administration would forget to notify us; kids were sent back to class, so my planning period disappeared and everything got pushed up forty-five minutes." Asked if she brought any of this up with her principal, DuPre says, "Nope. I didn't think it would make a difference." This kind of thing can come to seem normal—but it shouldn't.

The most valuable resource that teachers possess is time with their students. More time to teach, coach, mentor, and encourage doesn't mean students *will* learn, but a lack of time pretty much ensures that they won't. Across the nation, most teachers have perhaps six hours of instructional time a day, 180 days a year. That's 1,080 hours. Then start knocking out hours and days for testing, assemblies, early release days, and absences. In fact, researchers have found that only about 65–70 percent of school time is devoted to academic instruction, and even that time is disrupted by attendance taking, announcements, paper passing, pullouts, and the rest.⁵ Indeed, the typical elementary student loses more than forty-three days of math instruction a year to all of this.⁶ The consequences touch teachers of every stripe. For instance, districts scramble to find speech-language pathologists, yet practitioners spend an average of 450 hours a year on paperwork and in meetings.⁷ Administrators encourage teachers to spend more time filing comprehensive lesson plans, displaying student work, and posting "big goals" in their classroom. But the result can easily turn into busywork, endless punch lists, and inane demands. This makes it hard for teachers to "just close the door and teach."

No Upside for Excellence

Too often in schools the reward for good work is more work. Think of the terrific third grade teacher whose reward is his principal strolling up to him in the spring and genially saying, "We've got three second graders

who are a real handful. You're the only one I trust to handle them, so I'm going to give you all three next year, okay?" Now, it would be one thing if these requests came with recognition, compensation, or opportunities. But they usually come with nothing more than personal pleas, intimations of guilt, and assertions that it's the right thing to do. The result takes excellence for granted while encouraging all but the foolhardy to duck and keep their heads down. Roxanna Elden, a National Board certified teacher and author of *See Me After Class*, wryly notes, "Teacher leadership can mean a lot of things, but it almost always means unpaid time you're going to be putting in."

Not only is excellence not rewarded, but seniority-driven systems can make performance an afterthought. A 2014 analysis of policies in 114 large school districts found that more than 60 percent used seniority as the primary factor when deciding which teachers to let go during staff cuts, and just 10 percent made performance the primary consideration.⁸ When job security is that unrelated to performance, it says something. Forty-nine percent of teachers say that their school and district officials "do not reward outstanding teachers." Meanwhile, 80 percent of teachers favor additional pay for teachers who work in low-income neighborhoods, 64 percent for those accredited by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and 58 percent for those who consistently receive outstanding evaluations.⁹ How excellence should be defined or rewarded is a question about which thoughtful people will differ, but teachers agree that today's stifling norms aren't good enough.

Blindsided by Accountability

Teachers can feel bludgeoned by pointless tests, simple-minded accountability systems, and ludicrous expectations. As one deputy superintendent marveled to me, "We held a meeting where we just realized we have twenty-eight different tests. Nobody had ever realized it. We finally started writing them all down. Most aren't mandated, and we realized that nobody keeps track of them all. It was just one thing tossed atop another." In Florida, a 2013 review of testing calendars found that the typical district required ninety-eight local tests in addition to the state's mandated as-

assessments. Meanwhile, plenty of teachers report that accountability systems have meant boiling the school day down to reading and math. As one teacher put it, “By January, we’ve dropped science, art, social studies, and everything else. It’s reading for the first half of the day and math for the second half. It’s all about trying to make our numbers.”

Observers recall a teacher telling the then-superintendent of Philadelphia’s schools that the district bureaucracy was making it harder for her to teach well, and the superintendent replying, “What we need are teachers who don’t make excuses. I don’t want to hear about bureaucracy . . . We are looking for young people who say, ‘I can teach a rock to read.’” Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB), these kinds of ridiculous expectations have made accountability sometimes feel like a “gotcha” exercise. As Chester Finn Jr. and I observed many years ago, NCLB’s “grand ambition [of 100 percent proficiency] provided a shaky basis for policymaking, rather as if Congress had simply announced that America would suddenly no longer have any crime, pollution, or poverty.”¹⁰ Even when targets are practical, teachers can worry about the consequences of placing too much weight on testing. As American Federation of Teachers (AFT) director of field programs Rob Weil says, “Right now, the single measure of test scores is so important that people feel locked in. Persistence, the stuff that makes kids successful, gets lost . . . We’re so caught up in the measures that the learning gets lost.” These concerns are aggravated when, as is the case today, just 25 percent of teachers think that standardized tests accurately reflect student learning and just 45 percent think that students take the tests seriously.¹¹

THE SHAPE OF THE CAGE

A remarkable number of teachers say that they have come to accept feeling alienated, disempowered, and frustrated as just another part of the job, like glitchy technology or aimless staff meetings. These feelings are so deep-seated that the results of teacher surveys can seem nonsensical unless one recognizes that teachers take the cage for granted. For instance, 81 percent of teachers believe that unions are needed to protect teachers from school politics and abusive administrators. In another survey, teachers

ranked dead last—behind coal miners and truck drivers—when asked whether their work environment is “trusting and open” and if they are “treated with respect.”¹² Yet, *at the same time*, 85 percent of teachers report that their principal is doing an “excellent or a pretty good job.”¹³ This only makes sense if teachers think that administrators will be abusive and that schools will be lacking in trust and respect *even when schools are led by “good” principals*.

Eighty-six percent of teachers say they have to do “too much paperwork and documentation,” and 71 percent say they have very little control of what happens in school.¹⁴ Less than one-third report that they’re professionally engaged.¹⁵ And 69 percent don’t think their voices are adequately heard in education debates.¹⁶ Public Agenda’s Jean Johnson has summarized the state of affairs, writing, “70 percent of teachers believe that they are left out of the loop in the district decision making process [and] 80 percent feel that they are rarely consulted about what happens in their schools.”¹⁷ Yet, *at the same time*, Gallup reports that teachers rate their quality of life more highly than do members of any other occupation, save physicians. Teachers are more satisfied than are professionals, managers and executives, or business owners. Gallup similarly finds that teachers have the second highest Emotional Health Index score of all occupations, again trailing only physicians.¹⁸ This only makes sense if teachers *expect* to be disengaged and ignored as a matter of course.

While teachers feel unappreciated and undervalued, survey researchers report that the United States ranks slightly above average when comparing respect for teachers around the globe. The United States ranked ninth of 21 countries on this count in 2013, outpacing Germany, Switzerland, Japan, and the United Kingdom.¹⁹ American teachers might feel like they’re dealing with a hostile public, but the data suggests they actually enjoy more respect than do their Japanese or German counterparts.

Teachers fear abusive leaders and report that their work environments are lacking in trust and openness, yet they give their principals extraordinarily high marks. Teachers feel disempowered, ignored, and forced to spend much time on trivial tasks, yet they report high levels of personal and professional satisfaction. Teachers feel disrespected, yet American ed-

ucators fare better than average in terms of public esteem. The easiest way to reconcile these contradictions is to recognize that teachers have grown accustomed to their cage. Teachers accept dysfunction as routine, so they don't blame principals for stifling cultures. They accept administrivia as normal, so they settle for grumbling quietly about it. They feel powerless, so they figure that's the way it goes. They believe themselves to be disrespected and without support, so they respond accordingly. The cage is so familiar that it's practically invisible. Cage-busting starts by illuminating, with flares and floodlights, the bars of that cage.

WHO'S TO BLAME?

In writing this book, I talked to hundreds of teacher leaders who lamented the dysfunction they experience each day, even as they exhibited a remarkable willingness to accept it as the norm. Few voiced a clear sense of what they might do to change things. Instead, there was a lot of resignation, wry humor, and talk of classroom sanctuaries. The cage ensnares teachers, sucks their energy, consumes their time, and can leave them thinking that the smartest move is to mind their own business within their classroom's four walls.

Who is to blame for this? Everyone and no one. There are rules, regulations, and routines that have stacked up over the decades. The cage is the product of staffing norms, accounting practices, and collective bargaining agreements that have created a world where administrators won't think twice about having a talented educator waste an hour watching children board buses or eat lunch. This isn't anybody's *fault*, per se. Leaders have historically felt little urgency or obligation to address all this. Teacher preparation and professional development offer little guidance on how teachers can influence principals, system leaders, or policy makers. Most resources for teachers eschew such topics, focusing instead upon pedagogy, curricula, and how teachers can "survive" in their classrooms.

All of this is reinforced by bad habits and mental blocks that can trap teachers and keep them from acknowledging the cage or trying to do something about it. There are at least four familiar traps.

The MacGyver Trap. Readers of a certain age may remember the 1980s TV show *MacGyver*. Each week MacGyver found himself in impossible situations, only to escape by devising some ingenious contraption. Trapped in a Bolivian jail with a belt buckle and a bedspring, he'd design a flamethrower, break out, and save the world. You'll see a lot of MacGyver in many of today's great teachers. They work ridiculous hours raising funds and scoring favors from old friends in central administration. Their tales of ingenuity and remarkable accomplishment are inspiring. But MacGyverism creates an ironic trap. When non-MacGyvers point out the problems posed by the cage, they get told they're "making excuses," that they should "just look at how well MacGyver is doing." Meanwhile, the truth is that MacGyver is getting worn out.

The "Take Refuge in the Classroom" Trap. Good teachers frequently describe their classroom as a refuge from outside distractions and annoyances, so they're tempted to just close the door and teach. The result, however, can undermine their best efforts. Elisa Villanueva Beard, co-CEO of Teach For America (TFA), recalls her early years as a second grade bilingual teacher. Her students were doing well, she says, but "when I looked around, I realized that the third and fourth grade teachers couldn't keep it going—one of them hardly spoke English. I realized that I could do everything in my power to teach my kids, but if our school couldn't sustain that progress, so much would be lost." A teacher content to spin her magic within her room may never even notice all her good work being undone by the school and system around her.

The "Think Locally, Act Globally" Trap. You've seen the bumper sticker that reads "Think Globally, Act Locally." The idea is simple: be mindful of important, universal questions, but concentrate on the specific things that you can change. A problem is that too many teachers stand this logic on its head; they let concrete frustrations with policies, pay, tests, bureaucracy, or what-have-you provoke them into vitriol that's so broad ("testing, charter schooling, and Teach For America are evil!") that it's more the diatribe of a café anarchist than an actionable call for change. They wind up think-

ing locally and acting globally. The irony is that this turns their passion into a recipe for inaction.

The “This Too Shall Pass” Trap. Teachers have seen lots of reforms come and go. In my first book, back in the 1990s, I found that the typical urban school districts launched a major new reform every few months.²⁰ The most sensible response for teachers faced with this sort of insanity is to keep their heads down, close their door, and know that “this too shall pass.” As one teacher put it, “Teachers don’t engage because they’ve seen reforms come and go over the years and don’t believe this one is here to stay either.” You know what? It’s hard to quibble with that skepticism. But keeping heads down and doors closed means that teachers stay stuck in the cage, victims of the decisions made by a parade of system leaders.

A sense of helplessness can serve to reinforce or supersize the bars of the cage. As Suzy Brooks, a third grade teacher in Falmouth, Massachusetts, puts it, “I am in a professional and personal cage because I allow myself to be there. I censor my responses, suppress my opinion, let others speak up because my fear gets in the way.”²¹ Much of the cage is built out of fear, uncertainty, and lack of know-how. Busting through that requires more than great teaching or “teacher leadership.” It requires understanding the shape of the cage.

WHAT IS CAGE-BUSTING?

Cage-busting is concrete, precise, and practical. It asks what the problem is, seeks workable solutions, and figures out how to put those into practice. It asks precisely why schools are doing this and tallies the number of minutes wasted annually by demanding that. Cage-busting teachers are less interested in what policy makers or district leaders *ought* to do than in how teachers can *make those things happen*.

Cage-busting teachers don’t necessarily grab attention. What they do can often seem like nothing more than the commonsense behavior of a savvy professional. Guess what? That *is* cage-busting. Cage-busting is not

about garnering headlines or picking fights; it's about creating great communities of teaching and learning, one step at a time.

Most teachers have limited experience leading adults, thinking about systems, or talking policy. Thus, even when problems are obvious and sensible solutions easy to imagine, teachers can stumble. It needn't be this hard. Teachers frequently try to lead by squeezing through the bars of the cage—to move steel through sheer force of will. Cage-busting is about going at things differently so that life is less exhausting, opportunities more plentiful, and efforts more rewarding.

Michelle Shearer, a high school chemistry teacher in Frederick, Maryland, and the 2011 National Teacher of the Year, observes, "Many teachers have internalized the belief that the classroom is a cage and that you can't get anything done outside your walls. Often, when I'm talking to teachers, including those who've been named Teachers of the Year, they'll say, 'If I had my dream, I would do this, but it'll never happen.' I always stop them and ask, 'Why do you say that? Have you made a proposal? Have you worked it through the appropriate channels?' Far too often, the answer is, 'No.' So, the truth is, they don't really know what they can do."

Cage-busters know more is possible than teachers may imagine. As Bill Raabe, a veteran educator and the NEA's longtime authority on collective bargaining, says, "The truth is, teachers can usually do a lot more than they think. Teachers often start from a deficit model. They assume, 'There's nothing we can do—because of the contract or because of policy.' They should be asking, 'What do we want to do?' and then figuring out how to make that happen."

Jacob Pactor, a high school English teacher at Speedway High School in Indianapolis, was charged with improving support for failing students. His plan involved having teachers report student data monthly rather than waiting for quarterly intervals, in order to help them catch problems early. Teachers were on board, but, after a while, says Pactor, "The principal didn't like seeing all of the Fs. And he wasn't willing to let us follow through on any of our proposed consequences—stuff like afterschool detention where students would have to do their homework. So he cut the practice off." Pactor explored his options. He asked the school secretary if there was a way to update the online grade book in real time. She said that would be easy,

requiring only a simple change—meaning teachers could now get updates every day instead of every nine weeks. Pactor went to the principal with the idea, and the principal told him, “Sure.” Pactor reflects, “Without having to institute a formal policy, teachers now knew how students were doing in each other’s classes. They could plan interventions accordingly.”

Brent Maddin, provost at the Relay Graduate School of Education, recalls teaching in Franklin, Louisiana:

Our school had this policy that students had to be in the top of the class to take the ACT. The guidance counselor would not give other kids an ACT packet. The philosophy was: if other kids took the test, their scores would make the school look bad. I called ACT and got some packets myself. I started dealing them from my back porch, like I was trafficking in something illegal, not ACT materials. The guidance counselor was furious. She said, “I work with the ACT.” Ultimately, though, the principal said, “If you’re going to hand out packets, then you need to do prep.” So we began running afterschool and Saturday prep. By the end of the year, once they thought about it, the administration was on board. After all, that’s why we were all there. But, if we were doing it, they wanted the school to look good. Two years later, we’d added an official ACT prep course.

Sometimes, cage-busting is just getting school or system leaders to pursue policies more sensibly. Casie Jones teaches English at Martin Luther King Jr. Student Transition Academy in Memphis, Tennessee, a district that piloted the Gates Foundation’s massive Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project. The project featured a commitment to incorporating student feedback in teacher evaluation using the Tripod survey. Memphis’s Teacher Effectiveness Measure included student achievement, student growth, observations, and the Tripod score. While Tripod accounted for just 5 percent of a teacher’s score, Jones says, “The scores were a freak-out moment for a lot of teachers because we were going to eventually be paid on these scales, and we didn’t think they were fair or accurate. The motivation was good, but I’m an alternative teacher. My students struggle in reading, and the survey was 75 questions long. They’d get bored and stop answering.” She says a lot of teachers just complained, but she made a point of focusing on what changes she wanted to see. She says, “I conceded that

students are biased and shouldn't have the greatest voice but that if anyone knows how teachers are doing, it's students. When I'd meet with the district's teacher ambassadors, I'd advocate for Tripod but explain why they needed to shorten the survey." She helped shape the concerns into a memo "with a positive spin—here's a question and an idea of what should be done." She relates that the district agreed to cut the survey to forty questions. It's easy for teachers to grumble, "Nobody cares what I think." That's especially true when dealing with a major, multi-million dollar district initiative. But Jones didn't grumble. She identified a problem and got it solved.

Jeffrey Charbonneau, a science teacher at Zillah High School in Washington State and the 2013 National Teacher of the Year, wanted students at his small, rural high school to receive dual enrollment credit for his chemistry, physics, and engineering courses. Charbonneau says, "I knew my courses were demanding enough." After more than a decade in the classroom, Charbonneau was confident that receiving college credit would make students much more likely to matriculate—especially his predominantly Hispanic students, many of whom would be the first in their family to attend college. He reached out to Eastern Washington University and asked, "What do I need to do to for my chemistry course to count for college credit?" They said, "Sorry, we don't do that."

I talked to the chair of the department and got a "no." It was a problem that I didn't have at least a master's in chemistry. I spoke to the dean. I continued up the chain and just kept asking. I had three different meetings at the university. They'd ask, "How do you know you're teaching to a high enough standard?" I'd show them work examples. They asked how they'd know that my lectures were okay. I said, "Let me come guest lecture on campus and show you. Don't even tell me what class it is until the night before." What I was asking was, "Set the bar as high as you want, but give me an opportunity to meet that bar." After that, the faculty voted to allow it on a one-year trial basis . . . You need to understand their perspective. They have accreditation issues. Their accreditor is looking at the degrees that faculty have. I didn't realize that, but it helped me see why they were saying no. I went out and got National Board certification to help demonstrate that I'm teaching to a high level.

Meanwhile, Charbonneau took care to think about what was in it for the colleges. He says, "They get to influence exactly what kind of physics

and chemistry is being taught. It helps them with recruitment. And dual enrollment generates financial benefit for them.”

Of Zillah’s 100 eleventh graders, sixty took chemistry for college credit in 2013. The partnership now includes not just Eastern Washington but also Central Washington University and Yakima Valley Community College. And other teachers followed suit. Zillah students can now accumulate sixty-nine college credits during high school—nearly a year and a half of college credit. Charbonneau says, “At the start, I must’ve got twelve ‘no’s’ in a row. But I kept coming back with reasons why they should and how they could.” Oh, and Charbonneau’s efforts caught the eye of the governor and got him appointed to Washington’s Student Achievement Council—a state board that focuses on higher education. This is such a nice example of cage-busting because, once Charbonneau figured it out, it kept paying dividends. Colleagues could piggyback on the precedent. And he had relationships that he could tap in the future.

WHAT CAGE-BUSTERS BELIEVE

Cage-busters believe that actions change culture, and that talk does not. They heed the advice of Larry Bossidy, veteran CEO and coauthor of *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, who argues, “We don’t think ourselves into a new way of acting, we act ourselves into a new way of thinking.”²² They know that “culture change” can otherwise be short-lived.

Cage-busters believe that teachers can have enormous influence but need to earn it and harness it. Cage-busters recognize that earning influence and professional respect requires reshaping a profession that has accepted uninspired management and ineffectual routines for too long.

Cage-busters believe that *management*, not teachers, ought to be blamed if management fails to address mediocrity anywhere in a school system but that *teachers* ought to insist that management do its duty. If teachers don’t do that, cage-busters believe that they’ll have trouble convincing observers of their professionalism and commitment to excellence.

Cage-busters believe that “teacher leadership” is a cheery, amorphous term that’s only meaningful when it gets concrete. Cage-busters are less

interested in debating “Who’s *really* for the kids?” than asking, “What’s the problem we need to solve and how do we solve it?”

They believe in the value of precision and clarity. They believe it’s better to say “an extra forty-five minutes a day of instruction” than “extended learning time” and “an extra thirty minutes of computer-assisted tutoring” than “blended learning.”

Cage-busters believe that a focus on problem solving, precision, and responsibility can help teachers to create the schools and systems where they can do their best work. They don’t cage-bust *instead* of tending to curriculum and instruction. Rather, they cage-bust because they believe it will help forge schools and systems where their time, passion, and energy make the biggest difference for kids.

Cage-busters believe that the lucky get luckier. While I was writing this book, educators would sometimes ask me about it. After I’d share a story or two, most would half-sigh and say, “That’s interesting—but these are the exceptions.” They’d explain that these educators were teachers of the year or National Board certified or part of some privileged network or blessed with a great principal. In other words, they were the lucky few. What’s easy to miss is how often these teachers make their own luck. Candice Willie-Lawes, a special education teacher in New York City, says, “I intentionally built a good relationship with my [assistant principal], who is now my principal. Currently, she’s assigned me a teaching schedule with an alternate population of fifteen students and five wonderful paraprofessionals/teaching assistants. I can do my thing because I have that trust. I built it up over the past eight years. No one is going to respect you unless you’ve earned it. But once I earned it, it freed me to bust out of the cage.” Cage-busters identify problems, offer solutions, find strength in numbers, manage up, and—gosh—they keep getting lucky.

Finally, cage-busters don’t just believe—they *know*—that this stuff is hard and there will be plenty of missteps. But because each win dismantles another piece of the cage, they also know that time is on the cage-buster’s side. This is a great place to introduce Maddie Fennell, whom we’ll hear from several times in the chapters ahead. An elementary school teacher in Nebraska, Maddie has enjoyed enormous success and chaired the NEA’s Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching.²³ She’s also had her

share of setbacks. One was the time she was deposed as union president. She recalls, “In 2007, after being named Nebraska Teacher of the Year, I was elected president of my local union.” She says, “I was flying high. I’d been doing that for a year and a half and we had the highest membership in fifteen years. Then I went away for a week and a half.” When she returned, the union board demanded her resignation. It turned out the board had been swayed by an ambitious vice president who wanted to be president and who thought Maddie was driving the members too hard. Maddie agreed to step down. She says, “I cried for two weeks. I didn’t want to get out of bed. Then I knew I had to get back into the classroom. I was back in my element. And, you know what? I was stronger for it.” Cage-busters believe that stumbles and setbacks are part of the journey, not the end of the road.

TEACHERS POSSESS TWO KINDS OF AUTHORITY

Teachers are often unsure how they might bust the cage. After all, teachers don’t have a lot of formal authority in schools. This means it’s especially important that they be clear and strategic about tapping the authority they do have. After all, while teachers do lack *positional authority*, they have two powerful sources of authority at their disposal: the *authority of expertise* and a potentially powerful *moral authority*. Teachers rarely employ these to their full extent. Many aren’t even aware of the power they possess.

The *authority of expertise* comes from the fact that teachers know more than anyone else about how policies and practices actually affect students and classrooms. Teachers know what’s working, what’s not, and what’s really going on. They know how evaluation systems play out and how new technology gets used. They know which colleagues aren’t pulling their weight and where well-intentioned reforms are falling flat. If teachers share this knowledge clearly and constructively, they can profoundly influence policy and practice. In all walks of life, there’s a deep-seated desire to trust the expertise of professionals. People want to lean on the advice of their dentist, plumber, or mechanic, just because life is so complicated that people want someone with know-how to tell them what they need to do about a tooth, a faucet, or a car. The same holds true for schooling.

Moral authority is a different animal: it comes when professionals are seen as the guardians of the public interest. Now, there are a *lot* of efforts to sloganeer the way to moral authority—by saying things like “we’re for the kids.” Those slogans *do not* produce moral authority. Moral authority doesn’t come from *saying* that one is fighting for students. It comes with a track record of clear, consistent action to promote professional excellence. It derives from a record of doing things to help teachers get better, get systems to stop wasting time or money, and ensure that mediocre employees (whether they work in the central office or in classrooms) are dealt with appropriately. Moral authority is *earned*. It’s the product of teachers convincing parents, voters, and policy makers, “We’ve got this.”

The authority of expertise is only effective when professionals are deemed trustworthy. If people grant the expertise of auto mechanics, but believe that too many are ripping people off, it undermines the moral authority of all mechanics. The result is a public that second-guesses mechanics and asks elected officials to do something to pluck out the bad apples. The authority of expertise is bolstered by moral authority, and moral authority isn’t a question of what people think of this or that mechanic—but what people think of mechanics in general. For teachers, moral authority is not what people think of *you*, but what they think of the teachers at your *school*, or in your *system*, or throughout the *profession*. Moral authority is a team sport. That’s why retreating to the classroom is so debilitating.

PUTTING THAT AUTHORITY TO WORK

Powerful examples of teacher authority are scarce because schools aren’t in the habit of encouraging it, and because few teachers know how to gather it or to apply it. For one thing, the cage is mostly ignored in teacher preparation and professional development.

When teachers do pursue change beyond the classroom, they often go about it in ways that seem calculated to disappoint. They’ll raise reasonable concerns, but in vitriolic language that marginalizes their points and alienates potential allies. Too few teachers are really versed in the political or policy realities that permeate schooling. Few know who is making a

decision or have thought much about how they might win over lawmakers and leaders.

Teachers have also been hindered by a reluctance to police their profession. Teachers have long stood silent as principals give high marks to mediocre colleagues or as unions protect those who shouldn't be in classrooms. They've rarely challenged superintendents to do something about lousy professional development or ineffectual spending. The profession has suffered for this geniality.

Administrators dismiss sensible concerns as "complaints" and tune out useful suggestions. Teachers can conclude that no one is listening or cares what they think. And this is how things will remain, until teachers learn to put their expertise and moral authority to work. (See "Cage-Busters Make Things Happen.")

CAGE-BUSTING MOSTLY GETS IGNORED

It's not like teachers are hurting for advice. After all, a search of Amazon for the word *teacher* turns up more than three hundred thousand book titles. There's a lot of smart guidance out there for teachers seeking advice on instruction, pedagogy, curriculum, and culture. What's missing, though, is guidance on how teachers can deal with the cage. Indeed, because most of this advice emphasizes instruction and collegiality, it can have blind spots regarding policy, the policing of the profession, or the nitty-gritty of teacher leadership. David Imig, former president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, says, "Teachers may take a course here and there on teacher leadership, but what's striking is how overwhelmed even exceptional teachers are by their principal, environment, department chair, and everything else." Teachers are mostly left to their own devices when it comes to addressing dysfunction, knucklehead principals, or problematic policies.

A Passive Profession?

Even smart, thoughtful resources seem to start from a presumption that teachers just don't have that much power to change things. Advice often

Cage-Busters Make Things Happen

“Any new teacher will feel trapped within their four walls,” reflects Jeff Austin a high school economics and government teacher at Social Justice Humanitas Academy, “and that’s okay to start. You have to develop that part first.” Over time, though, Austin and his colleagues have learned to escape those walls in order to do their best work.

Austin started teaching in the suburbs. When he moved to Los Angeles, he says, he got “a quick slap in the face.” No matter how well he taught his students for one hour a day, he realized he could do his very best and still not make a real difference for too many kids. A few years before Austin arrived to teach twelfth grade, a couple of tenth grade teachers had started to coordinate their curriculum, modeling their efforts on the “small learning communities concept.” A few eleventh grade teachers liked what they saw and wanted in.

In 2005 Austin and his colleagues approached the principal armed with improved student achievement and discipline data and asked if they could rework classroom placement to ensure continuity for students in the program. Austin says, “We said, ‘How about we just give you our matrix and all you have to do is plug it in? We’re not asking you to create it—we’ll create it.’ The more we brought solutions, the more people just said, ‘Okay.’ Why would that principal stop us? We were literally taking work out of her hands. We were improving graduation rates and test scores without her having to do anything.”

By the third year, they had a school-within-a-school for grades 10–12 in social studies, art, and English. Seeking to expand further and incorporate all subjects, they asked the principal for the authority to hire math and science teachers to teach within their collaborative. The principal said it was okay with her, so they went to the superintendent. Leading with their achievement, graduation, and college acceptance data, they asked for clearance to work directly with human resources. The superintendent agreed.

Within a few years, they had a full, self-contained high school, covering all subjects for grades 9–12. At that point, Los Angeles launched a new “pilot school” initiative that offered autonomy to approved schools. Austin and his colleagues thought about applying, discussed it with the superintendent, and then, says Austin, “kind of let him think that he convinced us not to do it.” In return, they got laptop carts, a copy machine, science equipment, and new space.

The next year they decided to apply for pilot status. Austin says, "We were teaching and staying after school until 8:00 p.m. to work on the proposal. It was tiring but energizing, too. The LA Education Partnership gave us some office space. We were there Thanksgiving week, just writing and editing." Because the process involved a vote of community members, parents, and students, they held dozens of community meetings. There were four spots for eleven applicants. Austin's Social Justice Humanitas Academy snagged one.

Since the launch, Austin says, the challenge has been exercising the promised autonomy. "They let us believe we'd run the principal interview process," he says, and then the district gave them a list of candidates. Austin says a district HR official told them, "'I'll need to be at the interview and I need to ask these questions.' We told him, 'This is a teacher-led school. You're welcome to attend, but this is our interview.' The HR director totally, completely backed down. It was crazy."

After year one, smiles Austin, "We got our state test results back, and we were the highest-scoring public high school in Los Angeles." Three years on, in 2014, Social Justice Humanitas Academy was graduating 97 percent of its students and boasting the highest student attendance rates in the district. Austin and his colleagues remade the world in which they worked. The payoff for their hard work wasn't a plaque or more work; it was a school where they could be the teachers they always wanted to be.

emphasizes "survival," as in popular resources like *The First-Year Teacher's Survival Guide*, Scholastic's monthly "New Teacher Survival Guides," and offerings like *The Classroom Teacher's Technology Survival Guide* and *The English Teacher's Survival Guide*. Survival is fine, but it's not usually the measure of professional success.

Well-meaning advice for teachers routinely begins, "If you have a supportive principal . . ." The 2013 book *Everyone at the Table* offers smart guidance on how teachers can help shape teacher evaluation. But, when the authors note that teachers may be in places "where leadership does not support such an effort," they kind of shrug and tell teachers to be prepared "if and when the current leadership becomes more supportive."²⁴ That can

make for a long, frustrating wait. Cage-busters don't wait to work with leadership that gets it. They help leaders who don't get it *to* get it.

In *The First-Year Teacher's Survival Guide*, Julia Thompson advises, "Because it is almost impossible to cheer up people who are determined to be negative, associate with upbeat people who are focused on learning to be outstanding teachers instead."²⁵ It's not that this advice is wrong so much as it's docile. Cage-busters refuse to accept negativity and obstruction as givens; they're unwilling to settle for just trying to steer around them.

This passivity is especially striking when coupled with otherwise valuable advice. In *Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice*, Charlotte Danielson, an icon who has provided the profession with vital tools and insights, explains, "The culture to promote teacher leadership must be established and maintained first of all by district and site administrators."²⁶ She writes, "The culture of inquiry is established first by the administration. In a school with a well-developed culture of inquiry, administrators ensure that every teacher is aware of an expectation for ongoing professional engagement."²⁷ Danielson is right that good leaders should do these things. But sometimes they don't. And she doesn't have much to say about what teachers can do when their principal isn't making this happen.

Inattention to the cage is the rule, not the exception. Consider what's addressed in some of the most widely recommended volumes for teachers. A search of the top 30 lists on Google's "Recommended Books for Teachers," combined with the top 20 books on the Goodreads "Teaching" shelf, produced 29 widely recommended books for practitioners. An in-text search of these 29 books found that some topics were repeatedly discussed, and others were not.²⁸ Familiar classroom topics having to do with instruction, collaboration, and "social justice" were easy to find. *Technique* showed up 466 times, *discipline* 402, *culture* 159, *poverty* 131, *multicultural* 125, and *communication* 98. Teachers who want more advice on discipline or culture have plenty of places to turn. Yet, there's much less attention paid to the practical frustrations that can trip teachers up. If teachers are struggling with leaders, technology, wasted time, bureaucracy, or professional development, the most widely recommended texts have little to say. *Grant writing* showed up 26 times. *Work rules* and *bureaucracy* showed

up a dozen times each. And, altogether, practical frustrations like *wasted time*, *bad technology*, *bad professional development*, *bad principal*, *bad meetings*, *bad teacher*, *interference*, *district administrator*, *Title I*, *collective bargaining*, and *central office* showed up just a couple dozen times. The bottom line is that there are important, practical topics that just don't usually get addressed.²⁹

Cage-Busting and Great Classroom Practice Are Complements

When teachers ask me about resources for cage-busting, the books I get asked about most often are Doug Lemov's terrific *Teach Like a Champion* and Steven Farr's stellar *Teaching as Leadership* (see "*Teaching as Leadership*").³⁰ Both authors provide teachers with techniques that can help them take their instruction to the next level. Indeed, Farr's vision of leadership purposefully focuses on leadership *inside* the classroom, not outside it. He says, "When we were working on *Teaching as Leadership*, the question was, 'What are teachers doing in those classrooms to get these great results?'"

Cage-busting, though, deals with something different—how teachers can alter their larger schools and systems. Doing so can make it more possible for teachers to truly, as Lemov puts it, "practice perfect." Cage-busting helps teachers create the conditions where they can better use the advice proffered by the likes of Farr, Lemov, and Danielson. Classroom practice and cage-busting are not substitutes and they're not in competition. They're complements. Cage-busting can help teachers create schools where they can more effectively deliver instruction, mentor students, provide peer feedback, and promote collaboration.

In *Building a Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It to Everyone)*, journalist Elizabeth Green tells the story of Spartan Village, a professional development school that partnered with the education school at Michigan State University to serve as a lab for teaching strategies, including how to use high-quality observations to transform teacher education. The principal, Jessie Fry, energetically sought to alter the school calendar, adopt a new floor plan, and add staff time. Despite promising results, though, Green writes, "strains began to appear. Each time a new superintendent arrived . . . [Fry] had to defend the Spartan Village exceptions.

Every time budgets grew tight, the school board always seemed to turn to Spartan Village.” Whether or not the school was on the right track turned out to be irrelevant, as the effort “proved unsustainable.” The lesson: promising instructional ideas will only deliver when coupled with the cage-busting needed to see them through.³¹

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Teachers feeling isolated, frustrated, undervalued, and under attack is nothing new. In fact, that’s kind of how our K–12 system was designed. Dan Lortie, the University of Chicago’s famed chronicler of teaching, observed nearly four decades ago in *Schoolteacher* that practitioners historically haven’t had a lot of say about schooling: “Teachers never did gain control of any area of practice where they were clearly in charge and most expert; day to day operations, pedagogical theory, and substantive expertise have been dominated by persons in other roles.”³²

How did we get here? In 1800 teaching was a predominantly male profession. It was feminized by nineteenth century Common School reformers as they sought a large pool of inexpensive educators. The Common School expansion was fueled not by a grand strategy to boost student achievement but by the fear that a flood of Catholic immigration presented a threat to American values. School expansion was intended to make sure that lots of Catholic children would be reading the King James Bible under the tutelage of Protestant educators. This plan required cheap, available labor—and the solution was to turn teaching into women’s work. By 1900, most teachers were women.³³

In the early 1900s Progressive reformers decided that disorganized, decentralized schools could be improved through the insights of “scientific management.” These reformers, including business leaders and education professors, championed top-down management structures, salary schedules, professionalized school administration, and standardized record keeping. They eagerly imported the best practices of the industrial era, giving managers tight control over what the workers did and where and when they did it. Reformers trusted that smart, well-trained administrators (mostly

Teaching as Leadership

Cage-busting is a *complement* to great classroom practice. There is no conflict between tending to instructional practice and learning how to bust the cage. In fact, it's easiest to improve instruction when teachers are no longer trapped by the cage.

Steven Farr, the soft-spoken author of the influential 2010 book *Teaching as Leadership*, says, "The question we set out to answer was, 'What are teachers doing that's producing these insane results?' It was an action-focused approach. But over the past three or four years," he says, "we have seen that that we can go into two classrooms where they're using the same powerful techniques but getting completely different results." Many times, their differences can be chalked up to what's going on in the teacher's school.

Great teachers can work in troubled schools or alongside colleagues who aren't getting it done while feeling powerless to do anything about those larger challenges. Farr says that teachers need to address that, and, if they don't, "those cages are their own."

Teachers can find themselves yielding to pressure even when they think it's wrong for kids. Farr explains, "Teachers have a number of competing priorities. Teachers may know what they should do, but it's a big deal when the principal says, 'We're using a scripted curriculum and I expect to see you on this page, this day.' Teachers think, 'I don't want to get fired, and telling me to do anything other than what my principal says is unfair.' Your principal is your boss and can hire and fire you, but if you're that intent on pleasing your principal . . . you wind up making compromises."

Farr muses, "We need to talk not just about classroom practice but about purpose, relationships, and the broader set of things that affect the work." The instructional insights that Farr offers in *Teaching as Leadership* can be undermined by caged cultures and timid teachers. Cage-busting is not an alternative to the instructional expertise offered by Farr and others but a way to help ensure that teachers can put it to the fullest use.

men) could improve schooling by using factory-style management techniques to better control the teachers (most of whom were women).³⁴

There resulted all manner of capricious leadership, with teachers fired for being pregnant, allegedly harboring socialist sympathies, or failing to conform to height and weight charts. Teachers responded by fighting for protections like tenure, work rules, and salary schedules, which reflected the collective bargaining model used by workers in industries to take on powerful management. Their victories were real and important. These wins came at a price, however. Success meant school staffing practices were modeled on those of factory workers rather than those of the emerging professions. Those norms got embedded in schooling's regulations, contracts, and bureaucracies. Victories intended to tame fickle management came with a high cost, binding teachers ever more tightly into a latticework of steps, lanes, contract minutes, evaluation protocols, and more.

This back-and-forth has constructed the cage, bar by bar. It was built by reformers trying to dictate teachers' work and also by teacher advocates intent on adding new safety bars around teachers. The result is a profession with an astonishing lack of autonomy, opportunity for growth, or room for creative problem solving.

Despite one reform wave after another, the teaching job has remained remarkably static over the past century. This is true, observes Dana Goldstein in *The Teacher Wars*, even as "Americans have debated who should teach public schools; what should get taught; and how teachers should be educated, trained, hired, paid, evaluated, and fired."³⁵

While other knowledge-based industries saw the emergence of more flexible and adaptable staffing models, schooling did not. Staffing systems and salary schedules continue to treat teachers as basically interchangeable, with responsibilities and pay largely divorced from a teacher's expertise, effort, or accomplishments.

Today's educators are caged by policies and practices that may have once made sense but that seem poorly suited to attract, retain, and make the best use of talented professionals in the twenty-first century. Cage-busters begin by unshackling themselves from old assumptions and asking whether there is a better way to order the teacher's role, structure time, spend funds, or organize schooling.

NOBODY IS ALTOGETHER ON MY SIDE

In recent years the education debate has featured two warring camps. On one side are those who embrace test-based accountability, differentiated teacher pay, and school choice. On the other are those who broadly reject such measures while demanding more support for teachers and kids, more professional autonomy, and more emphasis on peer assistance and portfolios.

Teachers can feel pressed to be in one camp or the other. They attend conferences where state and district officials invite them to play leadership roles by championing this reform. They get e-mails from colleagues or union officials urging them to oppose that reform. Through it all, there's a sense they're supposed to pick sides—to be for or against school accountability, the Common Core, or charter schooling. Cage-busters don't accept that premise. Cage-busters are intent on creating schools where they can do their best work, and don't have time to get swept up in someone else's grand crusade. Cage-busters work to appreciate the logic of each proposal, understand its practical frailties, embrace the good, and reject or address the bad.

In all of this, teachers can take inspiration from an unlikely source: Treebeard, the wizened, ancient Ent who befriends a couple of lost young hobbits in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. On meeting Treebeard, in the midst of a savage war, the wide-eyed young hobbit Pippin asks him, "And whose side are you on?" Treebeard ponders the question and then laconically replies, "Side? I am not altogether on anybody's side, because nobody is altogether on my side."³⁶

A cage-buster is happy with neither camp in the current debates. He knows that some teachers work harder and are better at their jobs than others and that professionals *should* be accountable. But he also knows that many proposals for strengthening accountability are half-baked and that there's reason to fear overreliance on test scores or unreliable metrics. The cage-buster believes that reformers are right, that many policies need to change if more schools are to thrive. But he also believes that school improvement is ultimately about practice and not policy. In short, it's easy for a cage-buster to look at today's scorched-earth education debates and conclude that no one is altogether on his side. The funny thing is, by say-

ing just that clearly, firmly, and respectfully, he can make it more likely that he'll get a hearing from serious people on both sides.

CAGES AREN'T BUSTED BY CHEAP TALK AND LIP SERVICE

Teachers get lots of lip service and misty-eyed declarations of admiration. These cloying tributes are ritually offered to more than three million teachers without qualifiers or challenges. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has insisted, "I believe that [teachers] are absolutely the unsung heroes of our society."³⁷ Actor Matt Damon told a Save Our Schools rally, "I flew overnight . . . and came down here because I really had to tell you all in person that I think you all are awesome."³⁸ Or, as Michelle Collay put it in *Everyday Teacher Leadership*, "Teaching is not just another job. Choosing to work with children and youth on a daily basis is something elevated to superhuman status."³⁹

This isn't how we talk to professionals. These platitudes are the fluff of political speeches and celebrity profiles. You don't lard buckets of mushy sentiment on people you really respect. This is how we talk to Cub Scouts or t-ball players. This is the sweet, syrupy tone we reserve for little kids because they're cute and too fragile for tougher stuff. The truth is that such talk *infantilizes teachers and crowds out respect*. Real respect is earned. It's not given away freely or casually. It's a conversation between equals, and we usually don't feel obliged to shower banal praise on our equals.

All this happy talk is insincere. We know this because *nobody* honestly believes all of America's three-million-plus teachers are awesome or heroic. As one decorated teacher told me, "I am so sick of all this teacher heroism crap already. I'm a professional, not a hero." I mean, nobody thinks that every doctor, lawyer, professor, or cop is good or noble. Even Matt Damon doesn't think that every actor or screenwriter in Hollywood is "awesome." (How do I know? Well, a few years ago, Damon slammed screenwriter Tony Gilroy, saying of Gilroy's *Bourne Ultimatum* script, "This is a career-ender. I mean, I could put this thing up on eBay and it would be game over for that dude. It's terrible."⁴⁰) Real respect starts by saying plainly, to their

face, that some teachers are great . . . and some aren't and that it's the terrific teachers who deserve acclaim.

When teachers hear the empty blah-blah, they need to know that everything that follows is probably unserious—and that the real decisions are going to get made after the lights are turned out and teachers are ordered off to bed.

Cage-busting teachers don't just accept this insincere blather; they do something about it. Like what? Start by taking a page from U.S. Army captain Benjamin Summers, who took to the pages of the *Washington Post* in 2014 to flatly declare, "I have worn an Army uniform for the past eight years and deployed twice to Afghanistan. This doesn't make me a hero. Many veterans deserve high praise for their heroism, but others of us do not . . . Not every service member is a hero."⁴¹

The next time teachers hear someone launch into starry-eyed, infantilizing dreck, they should calmly them, "No thanks. You can keep the empty words." It's nice that Duncan, Damon, or whoever wants to pat teachers on the head. But professionals should calmly ask these allies to instead talk to them *as* professionals.

CAGE-BUSTING OFFERS A WAY FORWARD

A lot of advice presumes that if teachers are positive, passionate, and committed to their craft . . . well, things will work out. Yet, teachers can do remarkable work in their classroom only to wear themselves out as they slam again and again into the bars of the cage. Even teachers who've mastered some lock-picking tricks can find it tough to articulate or to share them.

I think of the teacher who held a PhD, had been named a "master teacher" by a national organization, and had worked eight years in the district office before returning to the classroom because her administrative job had her musing, "I could be teaching *Antigone* right now." Yet, when asked what advice she had for colleagues on dealing with school or system issues, this impressive woman could say only, "I tell them to just keep a positive attitude! I tell them to focus on teaching and learning, keep a smile on

their face, trust that the administrators know what they're doing and that everything else will fall into place." Her faith was impressive, but would leave teachers stuck when administrators don't know what they're doing or things aren't falling into place.

Teachers can feel powerless. They're not. Superintendents, school leaders, and policy makers are looking for problem solvers, and teachers are better positioned to help solve those problems than anyone else. People care what teachers think. Teachers have a lot to work with, even if they don't know it.

Advocates and lawmakers have little ability to affect what really happens in classrooms. Thus, they see little recourse but to push policy and hope that helps. Unfortunately, when it comes to things like teacher evaluation or school turnarounds, experience has taught that new policies frequently disappoint. When policies fail, reformers are inclined to think, "It *would* have worked if educators had bought into it and made it work." So, reformers push for more ambitious, detailed policies. Today we are in this destructive cycle where reforms garner more pushback, prompting calls for more aggressive and intrusive policy and yielding even more pushback.

Is there a way out of this vicious cycle? Yep. It starts with cage-busting teachers. It starts with teachers earning, employing, and leveraging the authority that will make them masters of their fate. It's about a new deal, where teachers embrace responsibility for what schools do and how students fare. Enough teachers doing this successfully can reassure policy makers and the public, building the trust that makes possible a new day and a new deal.

Ted Kolderie, senior associate at Education Evolving, captures what that deal might look like. "The old deal with teachers was, 'We don't give you professional authority and in return you don't give us accountability.' Now the 'reform' deal is supposed to be, 'You *will* give us accountability even though we still don't give you autonomy.' The good deal, the new deal," he argues, "should be, 'We will give you professional authority and in return you give us accountability.'"

Cage-busters are working to make *that* deal a reality. It starts with teachers tackling the things they can readily influence. It's not about pleas-

ing sentiments or talk; it's about action. It's action that shows seriousness, impresses observers, and changes culture.

Here's how things unfold from here. The next chapter looks more closely at key elements of cage-busting. Chapter 3 examines how to put cage-busting insights to work when dealing with school and system leadership. Chapter 4 explains why policy can be so frustrating and how teachers can make it less so. Chapter 5 shows how a cage-busting mind-set can help address the practical challenges of teacher leadership. Chapter 6 considers how cage-busters think about the teachers unions. Chapter 7 explores how cage-busters can think more broadly about what it means to be a teacher and the role that teachers play. And Chapter 8 brings it all together and seeks to offer some additional real-world advice.

With that, let's get started.