INTRODUCTION

Context Matters

WITHIN ALMOST 14,000 school districts in America there are approximately 3.7 million teachers, millions of support professionals, hundreds of thousands of building leaders, and thousands of central office leaders, all guided by the work of a superintendent and school board. Every day educators come to work within the context of their communities and districts, intending to teach and support students. The measure of their efforts is in the state accountability system, which typically considers annual state standardized test scores, graduation rates, attendance, and sometimes other local factors such as school climate data, arts participation, and community service. Educators spend all of their time trying to move the needle on these metrics: increase the graduation rate, increase the percentage of students from different backgrounds who pass the math portion of the state test, ensure young people are coming to school ready to learn, and provide additional services and supports when necessary. Rinse and repeat. Federal, state, and local funds are allocated to provide more interventions, services, and programs to students who are falling behind. Additional periods are scheduled to give more support, social workers and reading specialists are hired to intervene, new curriculum and technologies are purchased with the promise that they hold the key to improving student achievement.

Yet despite all of this effort and promises of change, too many students aren’t achieving standards, and educators are still looking for solutions. Throughout the nation, school district leaders, superintendents in particular, are working to implement new strategies grounded in equity and
Introduction

sometimes face resistance or simply don’t succeed. Leaders need a new approach. This book provides system leaders a path to transforming their systems through an equity lens. By offering examples from my own experience and that of superintendents who have worked to align their districts around a coherent equity strategy, this book gives leaders a framework for transforming their systems. The six elements of transformation I describe are the entry points for that journey.

*Teaching and learning* is the place to begin a transformation effort, as what adults do every day with students in classrooms is the essence of schools. System leaders must then organize around shared values, be explicit and transparent about decision-making, allocate resources according to vision and need, and manage people to achieve new levels of performance. All of this happens within the system’s culture. This book is intended to help superintendents and system leaders organize an equity-based transformation agenda by focusing on these six entry points.

I use the term *entry point* to suggest that there are no single solutions or one way of doing things. I also refer to superintendents and system leaders interchangeably while making distinctions when appropriate. As this book is based on my experience and that of others who have led or are currently leading school systems, the stories and examples are from that perspective. But district cabinet members play significant roles in system-wide transformation efforts and, as Honig and Rainey have shown us, are key players in driving improvement.¹

While school districts typically look similar, each context is different, and every leader’s story is their own. If there’s no one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement, neither is their one for systems transformation. There are, however, some key principles that leaders should attend to as they enact a comprehensive transformation strategy. There are essential questions to ask about whether the system is optimally organized for equity and excellence. I use the term *entry point* to suggest that it is up to the leader to determine how they will engage in a process of organizing their teams, communities, and schools around a clear set of guiding principles upon which their transformation effort rests.

Much has been written about school improvement practices and effective schools. Most leaders learn change management theory, and there are
countless books and articles about various policy, pedagogical, or technical solutions that promise significant change in how schools operate. Yet we don’t tell enough stories about how real school system leaders drive a transformational equity agenda. I think we need to understand how leaders make difficult choices within the context of their complex systems if we hope to understand how to better organize our school districts so that they serve our children at a higher level. This book attempts to do just that.

I also think that rather than focus solely on student learning, we must also attend to the daily practice of adults within a coherent and aligned system. I use the term system throughout this book to describe the interconnected actions of adults and young people within a district and schools. Every day in school districts people are doing something that should be leading toward a larger goal. Those actions may be distinctly connected to each other, or they may be intentionally or unintentionally discrete. I believe that the job of a leader is to ensure that schools and central offices are working in concert around a shared set of equity goals with a clear understanding of the practices that will lead to increased student achievement. For most of this century, too much of the discourse about public school improvement has been enamored with the promise of bold, sweeping changes devoid of context and appreciation for the actual change process itself. I believe we need to focus instead on the steady improvement of average adult practice. The policies, regulations, past practices, contractual agreements, and guidelines by which adults work within school systems make up the rules that guide short, near, and long-term actions. Those rules are complex. Leaders who hope to improve teaching and learning and increase student achievement need to embrace that complexity and rewrite the rules.

School system leaders today are also faced with an equity imperative. Our schools are more diverse than ever, and too many of our most vulnerable students aren’t receiving the education they need to succeed in college and careers. Strides have been made in some schools and some districts by leaders who ensure that all students have access to high-quality instruction. Many educators have embraced the equity imperative by reallocating resources, providing necessary supports, regularly analyzing data, engaging the community, opening access to high-level courses, activating student
voices, and ensuring that collaborative learning among adults is driving improvements in practice. These core elements of an equity agenda are hard to scale within a school district, and many leaders are just starting their equity journey and don’t know where to begin. The six entry points I describe in this book are the starting points. The stories I tell of leaders provide examples of how to organize and drive an equity agenda.

Every school system exists within its own context, and every leader brings their own story to the work of transformation. System improvement will look different among various districts, even though there may be similar elements. Superintendents must adhere to certain core principles as they lead a transformation effort, but they must also do so authentically. A superintendent who’s trying to transform their system through an equity lens has to organize their efforts around six entry points. An entry point can be a starting place for collective inquiry processes. Transformation starts with leaders identifying the problem they’re trying to solve and then organizing processes that will lead to a change in adult practice intended to improve student achievement. School districts are incredibly complex systems that are judged by stakeholders based on their limited experiences in one part of it. A system leader’s job is to see the gestalt. Yet they must enter into that whole in deliberate, intentional ways in order to lead others toward improvement. The six entry points in this book offer such an approach.

I also think it’s important that superintendents and system leaders understand the history of school district design and how it influences and constrains them. We didn’t get here by happenstance. Elected officials, the federal government, local school boards, and superintendents have made choices along the way about how they think school districts should be organized. Power and decision-making authority over personnel, curriculum, school construction, and resource allocation have been determined by statutes, policies, and contractual agreements that have emerged and calcified over time. While it’s not reasonable to suggest a superintendent can change or disregard these long-standing strictures, I believe it’s helpful to understand how they’ve come to be so that a leader can then know how to act differently. Santayana’s maxim rings true: If we don’t know our history, we’re doomed to repeat it.
PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

For more than twenty-five years I have been part of leading system-wide transformation efforts through an equity lens. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as a cabinet member in a small urban district, I led the design of an accountability system that aligned our efforts to improve instruction, address social-emotional learning, and engage the community. In New York City I worked in the Joel Klein administration as that system was being radically overhauled, first on curriculum and programs and then on accountability system design. In my first superintendency I led an effort to detrack academic courses while raising standards and engaging the community. And in my second superintendency I began the process of shifting the rigid orientation of the system away from standardized tests and toward creative problem solving, social emotional learning, and higher academic standards. All of these efforts required a deep dive into the organization and alignment of the system itself. I learned how a leader can ensure that the interactions among people within a coherent framework grounded in equity and excellence are leading to the desired results. The six entry points I describe throughout this book provide leaders that framework.

I have also observed and learned from other leaders who are doing this difficult work and researchers who have studied what it takes to improve outcomes for young people. I wrote this book to try to capture what I’ve come to know as the overarching tenet of the superintendency: there is no single approach to change that will work in every context. Certainly, that’s clear in the research and the lived experiences of anyone who has actually done the work in schools and systems. Yet, I’ve seen the marketplace, policymakers, and parents, sometimes amplified by the media, claim otherwise. Each leader must use their own experiences to navigate the complexity of the context they find themselves in. They need to build a great team, know the research, and build on and learn from the work of others. And there are principles that can be adhered to that I believe will lead to success. The six entry points and stories of leaders in this book will help system leaders begin an equity-based transformation effort.

In 1992, when I began substitute teaching in a NYC school for adolescents labeled with an intellectual disability, I had no idea it would lead to
a career as an educator. I had always liked working with young people and knew that public service was my calling, but teaching wasn't on my radar. I needed a temporary job, though, before moving to the West Coast, and a good friend of the family was an Assistant Principal at the school and said I could easily get a substitute license. Ninety dollars a day was some real money, so I jumped at it. Once I got to San Francisco, there were few jobs available given the recession, but a group home for adolescents with mental health needs, many of whom were serving the last part of their sentences in the juvenile justice system, was hiring counselors. My eyes began to open to the gross inequities in the design of our public youth-serving systems.

When I returned to New York a year and a half later to take a teaching job in a school serving adolescents labeled with severe emotional disabilities, I became increasingly aware of how schools are designed to oppress many and privilege few. My students had serious problems that had been misdiagnosed and untreated. They, and their families, were poor, Black, and Latinx and caught up in multiple social service agencies. When they got to my school, they had already been kicked out of every other NYC District 75 placement. Their problems manifested themselves in aggressive behaviors because adults had not been able to serve them properly. The juvenile justice system, child protective services, foster care, mental health services, and public schools were not equipped to address their deep issues. I was charged with preparing them for the Global Studies Regents, the subject test that all students in New York State had to pass to get a Regents diploma. I had no teaching degree yet, but enough undergraduate credits in both English and history to qualify for a provisional license. My experience in California and my bachelor's degree were enough for NYC to determine that the least experienced teacher was qualified enough to serve the most vulnerable students. This was a systems design issue, and it set me on a lifelong journey of seeking to fix the very underpinnings of how we use public dollars to support the actions of adults who are supposed to make things better for youth.

Interestingly, this was also the advent of Teach for America (TFA), whose whole theory of action is that smart and passionate college graduates can serve students in low-income communities better than their traditionally prepared colleagues. I’ve known some great former TFAers who stayed as
educators and became committed to the work. But the effect on actual students of this experiment is mixed, at best, while the idea captured the imagination of philanthropists, policy makers, and the media. It’s a perfect example of how education has been caught up in simplistic solutions when the realities of change are so much more complex. This is why I’ve written this book.

Public schools have never served all children equally or equitably. This has been tacitly understood as a condition of American life, although lawsuits and major court cases have exposed resource inequities and led to some changes. Until No Child Left Behind (NCLB), achievement differences among student groups simply weren’t measured or made apparent in the way they are now. This condition has thus become an organizing principle for school improvement over the last generation, although little progress has been made at scale. I became a system leader at the beginning of the NCLB era and watched first-hand as educators struggled to help schools improve. We tried various strategies such as mandating new curriculum, increasing site-based autonomy, or creating new rules and regulations. Some worked, others didn’t. What has become abundantly clear is that there are no panaceas. This book rests on the idea that the role of a system leader is to help school leaders design, implement, and sustain comprehensive strategies for school improvement within the context of a district-wide transformation effort. I argue that while there can be a variety of approaches to improvement, there are core practices that system leaders can employ to ensure that schools are supported in that journey.

I’ve spent a lot of time considering the question of what keeps various initiatives from resulting in the desired outcomes, despite the promises of politicians and leaders. What can superintendents and their teams do differently that will result in real system transformation? Part of what I’ve come to realize in answering this question is the different worlds that system leaders and the public live in. The latter wants easily understood solutions to complex problems. They don’t understand the underpinnings of how public-school districts have been constructed and how they work. They want their problems to be quickly solved by the people who are paid from their tax dollars and have little tolerance for explanations about why it may not be as easy as they think. Superintendents and system leaders, on the other hand, are engulfed in complexity. They would offer easy solutions
when possible, but few things are. Equity, in particular, is an issue that has vexed us for far too long and doesn’t lend itself to quick fixes or easy choices. School system leaders need to address equity issues by organizing coherent strategies that embrace the complexity of change. Long-lasting change in public school systems doesn’t come from implementing a new program with fidelity. Leaders who rely on a single initiative or product, such as the purchase of new technology (e.g., iPads) or a change in structure (e.g., block scheduling), run the risk of wasting precious time and funding. Rather, superintendents must understand the complex formal and informal rules, processes, and structures that undergird the daily actions of thousands of adults within the system, and then rewrite those rules and build a new ecosystem to attend to the needs of today’s schools, educators, and students. And they can’t do it alone. Superintendents have to develop and guide their teams and engage stakeholders in collaborative change management processes that align the work of adults around a clear set of nonnegotiable equity and student achievement goals. Their focus must be on adult practice.

School district leaders must understand the key levers of the system that improve adult practice to better serve children. Students won’t learn the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in their future unless adults start doing something differently. System leaders are essential to organizing processes and developing structures for schools to do just that. The assignment of teachers, for example, is one of the most important equity moves that leaders can make, as the best teachers should serve the most vulnerable students. But when I’ve asked system leaders about their approach to equity, many will describe the workshops on antibias instruction or the book study on culturally relevant pedagogy. Those efforts to change beliefs are necessary underpinnings of an equity strategy, but they won’t lead to transformation on their own. System leaders need to couple the adaptive work of changing belief systems with the technical work of rewriting the rules. If there is no change in the rules guiding the assignment of teachers to students, leaders are left with only wishful thinking that actions will change. By ensuring the best teachers are with the most vulnerable students, coupled with a deep investment in changing beliefs, system leaders are more likely to promote the kind of change they seek. Yet superintendents must
understand and confront some of the reasons why the initial teacher assignment rules exist in the first place. Within schools and districts, wealthier parents tend to demand more highly qualified teachers. Union contracts can limit the authority of a principal or system leader to reassign teachers. Teacher evaluation processes don’t always allow for the gathering of holistic data that can help a leader determine a teacher’s true strengths and needs. This book delineates an approach to change management that will help leaders understand these dynamics in order to change them.

Despite the mixed results of the last twenty years of reform, funders, policy makers, and practitioners are turning to new methodologies grounded in old ideas. While there are fewer claims of silver bullets, there’s certainly continued admiration of technology, career technical education, school choice, and racial integration. Some reformers are calling for increased attention to curriculum and pedagogy, which is welcome, but I fear that these continue to be structural solutions to instructional problems. We hear regularly that the jobs of tomorrow haven’t even been invented yet, so we need to teach universal skills adaptable to any occupation. But a classics-type education that focuses on knowledge acquisition may just be the key to helping our students achieve. And everything we thought we knew about reading instruction turns out to be wrong. These “if-there-were-just” arguments come in and out of vogue every so often, and the educator is left standing in the middle, having to make choices every day that affect their students. What’s missing from these debates is the necessary attention to the various components of the systems by which adults come together every day to serve children. The rules by which these systems exist and the choices that leaders make create the conditions under which teachers teach, leaders lead, and students learn. Leaders, especially superintendents of schools, need to consider six entry points if they want to transform how students are taught and what they achieve. And they must understand how we got to where we are today.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCHOOL SYSTEM DESIGN

I remember reading Ray Callahan’s classic 1962 study, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency,* in graduate school and first beginning to understand the genesis of school systems being designed around Frederick Taylor’s
notions of scientific management. As Jal Mehta so aptly described in *The Allure of Order*, school districts were designed for operational compliance. Prior to the 1990s, schools focused on teaching and learning while school boards, superintendents, and administrators ensured fiscal and operational efficiency and compliance. Yet these same systems were never designed to truly let schools lead teaching and learning. Collective bargaining agreements with teachers, efficient transportation schedules, consistent start and end times, bulk purchasing of materials, budget formulas, and staffing models all constrain the ability of schools to go beyond the district-determined approach to teaching and learning. Principals are then left to allocate the resources they’ve been given and manage their employees and communities within the guardrails that have been set up. The tension between the autonomy and decision-making power of the individual school and the strictures of the district is often referred to as the “loose–tight continuum.” This tension is the high wire that superintendents balance on when they’re leading an equity-based transformation effort.

As Weick described in his classic paper and Elmore further delineated, school systems are controlled and managed by leaders who are disconnected from the actual work that happens within schools. Thus, their actions are often discordant with what schools need in order to serve students well. When it comes to content—what students should know and be able to do and what adult capacities will help them achieve those standards—this loose–tight dynamic can be exacerbated and create more tension. School districts simply aren’t organized to improve instruction and, in fact, hadn’t been expected to do so until this last generation of reform. They were, however, designed to control from afar what front-line teachers were doing. During the Progressive Era, management “sought to shift power upwards from frontline workers (teachers) to administrative superiors, who would set goals, prescribe desired strategies, and use an early form of assessment to hold teachers accountable for their performance . . . expertise and hence power reside at the top rather than on the front line.” This kind of administrative control was rooted in patriarchal attitudes toward a female workforce combined with the latest thinking about efficient management. Moreover, historically, school systems
were designed with the belief that resource allocation—books, teachers, supplies—would lead to outcomes, so central offices were responsible for that more than anything else. Due to grave concerns about American students falling behind other those of other countries and thus compromising our economic competitiveness, the 1980s brought the beginning of the standards and accountability movement that we’re still in today. According to Peurach et al.:

The debates and compromises of the 1980s and early 1990s began to build consensus around operational conceptions that would soon drive federal and state policy. Excellence would center more narrowly on improving outcome measures for all students (and not privileging the success of some while neglecting others). Equity would center on reducing disparities in outcome measures among students, such that, as quality increased, gaps between students would narrow (and not sustain or expand). Realizing these ambitions, finally, would require comprehensive, coordinated initiatives aimed at transforming U.S. public education from an access-oriented mass public schooling enterprise to a collection of instructionally focused education systems.

This movement culminated in the 2001 passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), forcing central offices to manage school improvement according to state accountability systems aligned to the new federal law. To comply with NCLB, districts increased investment in instructional support, technical assistance, and professional development, which meant that system leaders had to increase their span of control. As such, they had to learn new skills. These new skills, however, were grounded in old mental models of compliance and monitoring. Moreover, the structures and functions of the central office didn’t fundamentally change with the new work they were expected to do. Again, according to Peurach et al. (2019):

It has also created new organizational categories that can be used to signal a positive responsive to excellence and equity though, again, without making deep changes in classroom instruction: for example, pursuing “21st-century skills” and “deeper learning” using “culturally responsive pedagogies” and “restorative practices” supported by “research-based,” “research-validated,” and “standards-aligned” curriculum materials, all under the guidance of “highly qualified teachers” engaged in “data-driven decision making” and “PDSA cycles” in “professional learning communities.”
This “signaling” of new work, combined with a single-minded focus on English language arts (ELA) and mathematics standardized test scores, has not led to significant improvement in student achievement, although there has been an increased investment in central offices to support programs and centralized management of improvement processes. Moreover, most are still organized under an old paradigm, even as they claim to be doing new work. Central offices are structured according to strict divisional responsibilities. Depending on the size of the system, the superintendent (who reports to an elected board of education) typically has a cabinet comprised of assistant superintendents who oversee various functions. Within operations/administration is usually housed finance, procurement, transportation, facilities and maintenance, food and nutrition, safety, and information technology. Human resources may sit within operations, although more and more we’re seeing it as a stand-alone entity. On the instructional side of the house is curriculum and instruction, which usually contains content areas, special programs such as English language learners (ELLs) and special education, pupil personnel services, social emotional learning (SEL), federal title programs, and instructional technology. Oftentimes the office that deals with research, planning, and accountability reports up to the curriculum side of the house, as does the diversity, equity, and inclusion team (which may include community engagement), if there is one. Again, depending on the size of the district there may be an assistant superintendent or chief that supervises principals, or that could be the job of either the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction or the superintendent. I was a cabinet member in small district of eight thousand students and twelve schools, and superintendent of two districts, one with 15,500 students in twenty schools and the other with 154,000 in two hundred and two schools, and each system had a variation of what I described above.

Regardless of the composition and duties of the superintendent’s cabinet and subsequent central office departments, the work itself is designed to be separate and distinct. Each assistant superintendent and their direct reports have a discrete job, reporting requirements, statutes and regulations, funding sources, and deliverables. Certainly, this logic is clear when serving food, transporting students, or maintaining school buildings. Such
functions require consultation with school principals and coordination with other central office units but are largely independent. Yet those lines become a little fuzzier when considering the purchase of technology—both hardware and software—or recruiting and hiring teachers, or engaging with the community. Those functions should be aligned to the needs and visions of the various schools within the system. The supervision of principals is all too often a black box, wherein only the supervisor (superintendent, assistant superintendent, or some other official) and the supervisee have reviewed the data to determine progress, set new personal and professional goals, and develop a plan to help the school improve. Yet, as we will see, principal supervision is the lynchpin of a system-wide transformation effort.

The silos of central offices are not easily torn down. Most superintendents restructure their central offices early in their tenure as a symbol of the new regime and strategy. Job descriptions are rewritten, veteran administrators reapply for a position, and promises are made about how the new structure will lead to increased efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and achievement. And then not much changes. Too little attention is paid to how these actors interact with each other and with schools every day to rewrite the rules. New job descriptions and titles won’t by themselves attend to the complexity of transforming public school systems. They may offer an opportunity to bring in new talent or accelerate the implementation of an initiative. But they won’t fundamentally change how the system works to serve children. But, as Honig and Rainey have shown, it is possible to transform a central office around clear student learning and equity goals. The only way to truly transform public school systems, in my view, is by embracing that complexity and rewriting the rules of how leaders within the system come together around six entry points of transformation. This book is intended to help leaders do just that.

STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book is intended to provide K–12 public school system leaders guidance about how to transform their systems to improve teaching and learning through an equity lens. By describing an approach to change
management that embraces the complexity of how public-school districts actually work, leaders will learn how to rewrite the rules of the systems in which students receive an education. My approach to change management is grounded in helping school system leaders use effective, research-based practices that promote equity and lead to improved student learning and achievement. I suggest that there are six entry points system leaders must attend to as they seek to transform the district. This book will focus on the complexity of the role that central office system leaders play in designing, implementing, and sustaining such efforts.

The six entry points in this book are based on my experience in school systems, my understanding of the literature, and my observations and knowledge of the work of superintendents and system leaders throughout the country. I’ve been doing this work for a while, and while I’d never suggest that these six should be the sole focus of a superintendent, I believe they’re a good starting point. The rules that I suggest should be rewritten are meant to serve as examples. They’re not an exhaustive list, as every district has its own context, history, and regulatory environment. Again, I’m suggesting that superintendents and system leaders need to ask questions about the written and unwritten rules that guide the daily actions of adults within their systems. Those actions will accelerate or stymie an equity agenda. I provide multiple examples of equity work that leaders have used, although I don’t provide an exhaustive or definitive list of every successful equity move a leader can make. To my mind, the question is not whether a leader can describe the enactment of such practices and even get policies or budgets passed to support them. Rather, it is how they go about doing so that is the real test. Whatever the equity move may be, its success depends on the leader’s strategy for implementation.

The first entry point I consider is teaching and learning, as that should be the main focus of school systems. That is the reason they exist. The rule that leaders must rewrite is about who gets access to what kind of instruction. The standards movement of the last thirty years has led to changes in how students are taught and the content they’re exposed to. Schools have organized around Advanced Placement (AP), algebra by eighth grade, problem-based learning, and more recently career pathways. The essential question is who has access to that kind of higher level, engaging
instruction. Too often it’s white and Asian students who are placed in the most advanced courses and given opportunities to learn higher-level content. Students who are Black, Latinx, differently abled, English language learners, or poor aren’t given the same opportunities. System leaders must start their transformation effort by focusing on that question.

The second entry point is values, as system leaders must focus on what we believe about adults and children. Every leader comes into their work with a set of values and beliefs about education and how change happens. And every community and school has their own values and approach to change. Transformation efforts grounded in equity must navigate through these different values and beliefs about how change should happen and who actually needs to change. The rule that needs to be rewritten is about how leaders engage stakeholders in processes that create a set of shared values to organize system-wide change. Those shared values are the foundation for strategic planning and the development of language that reflects high aspirations for students. Moreover, leaders must first “know thyself” and make their values and stories clear to their community. By authentically doing so they inspire others to follow their lead.

The third entry point is decision-making. Leaders need a clear understanding of where formal and informal power lies. An equity-based transformation agenda requires superintendents to be clear about who gets to make what kinds of decisions. The rule that needs to be rewritten is one of transparency and engagement. System leaders don’t have the power to make every decision. They can use their influence, they can inspire, they can cajole, and they can push and pull people along. But determinations about who gets taught what and how, the allocation of resources to support the system’s vision and needs, and how talent gets distributed are made with and by others throughout the system. Leaders need to be transparent about how those decisions get made, the data used to inform them, and the intended outcomes. In addition, comprehensive engagement processes that activate stakeholder voices are essential components of an equity agenda.

The fourth entry point is resource allocation. Leaders need to attend to how time is spent, talent is distributed, and money is allocated according to the system’s vision and needs. Leaders spend an enormous time on getting
a spending plan passed by the board of education, taxpayers, and the local funding authority. Yet, funds aren’t the only way to think about resources. How educators spend their time every day, and which educators serve the most vulnerable students, are essential ingredients of an equity agenda. The rule that needs to be rewritten is both simple and complex. Leaders must ensure that those who need the most get the most. This is easier said than done, given the complexity of public school systems.

The fifth entry point is talent management. People not only comprise more than 80 percent of a school district’s budget, they’re also the most powerful equity tool that a superintendent has. System leaders need to focus on the people who are actually doing the work every day with students.

No program, policy, or technology will mean anything if the people who interact with students, families, and educators aren’t supported, developed, and held to a high standard. The rules that need to be rewritten concern systems of recruitment, collective learning, and support of the educators within the system. Equity-based transformation agendas also require that attention is paid to increasing employee diversity.

The sixth entry point is culture. Leaders need to understand the unwritten rules of the context they’re in and how people feel and act within the organization. How people interact with each other every day in service of young people and families is the foundation of improvement. An improvement culture requires that people grapple with hard truths and make collective decisions about how to achieve goals and address needs. Establishing the trust needed to sustain an improvement culture is work that only the superintendent can do, even as they inherit extant cultures. The rule that needs to be rewritten is simply about paying explicit attention to culture while modelling what a leader wants to see others do.

In the seventh and final chapter I try to tie everything together. I offer some practical strategies and moves that system leaders can make to drive an equity agenda. Again, these are not meant to be conclusive or exhaustive. Rather, they are ways to organize collective effort to transform public school systems so that more students achieve a higher standard.

Each chapter consists of some of my personal stories as a system leader, references to relevant literature, and depictions of leaders who have done the work. The leaders I chose to profile in this book have had varying
degrees of success as superintendents. I intentionally spoke to people I have watched lead over the year in different roles and various contexts. Some have had great success as superintendents; others have struggled. And that’s part of why I wanted to write this book. Leaders are made of their successes and their failures. If a leader has never failed, it’s probably because they were too timid and cautious. An equity agenda requires bold action and difficult decisions. The complexity of organizing collective action in a highly politicized and regulated environment cannot be overstated. Superintendents who choose to take on such work do so because they feel a sense of urgency that adults can do better by young people. Sometimes that urgency to act is thwarted by the conditions and actors on the ground. Yet, even if a leader hasn’t been able to see their work to its full fruition, they can still embrace the complexity and rewrite the rules so that children are better served in our public schools.