

## PREFACE

This book presents a process through which school leaders can address a myriad of organizational and educational challenges in their school, from the mundane to the relentlessly complex. The process, called human-centered design, or design thinking, can help create new solutions to problems schools face. This book describes the techniques school leaders can use to reframe challenges by *thinking like a designer* to create unique, effective solutions.

Although the application of design thinking in education is not new, this book was written specifically to provide an explicit step-by-step road map for school leaders—including superintendents, principals, and teacher-leaders—to effect sustainable, student-centered change. In my experience, other guidebooks about design thinking on the market have limited utility for busy school leaders, and this has been part of my motivation for writing this book. The biggest gap in the current materials available for educators is a collection of examples. I’ve noticed that one of the ways my students and professional development participants prefer to learn is through case studies and examples. Most resources available now offer more of a “how to” than a “why” or a “what happens when.” While this information is valuable, it tends to come off as more of a checklist than a narrative. An irony in all of this material is that, although uncovering and telling another person’s story is a key aspect of a successful design thinking process, the current works out there don’t do this effectively—they don’t tell stories that help readers see themselves

and inspire them to try new steps. In essence, they don't practice what they preach. Last, and perhaps most important, other materials available to educators don't provide an overarching focus on students as participants, or codesigners, as this book does.

School leaders are uniquely positioned to bring together the stakeholders needed to invent the solutions demanded by today's educational environment. As you will read, I believe anyone can be a designer, and the processes and tools described in this book were themselves designed to be accessible and low-cost.

I was first exposed to design thinking when I was a social research scientist at Stanford University, long before I applied it in a school setting. There I was mentored by colleagues associated with my lab, the Stanford Learning Lab, including Larry Leifer, Sheri Shepherd, Doug Wilde, Bernie Roth, and Rolf Faste. When I later took a faculty position at Iowa State University in 2009, I grasped the opportunity to fill a gap I saw: that design thinking, while reaching teachers, students, the corporate sector, and even the developing world, had not been framed as a tool for shaping schools as organizations. Since that time, I have been working with preK–12 educators, higher education groups, statewide agencies, community foundations, international schools, nonprofit organizations, and other groups that support education. I have introduced design thinking in a variety of settings and shown how to apply it as a tool to solve tough problems both large and small. For example, educators might wish to

- reimagine how spaces in schools can support student collaboration
- create a new, innovative school schedule for an urban high school
- improve course offerings for students
- introduce school policies and instructional practices that give students greater agency
- enrich the early learning programs in an entire state

The process, tools, and worksheets included in this book have been adapted or created with school leaders in mind. They have also been tested in the field, and my most popular process, which involves school leaders codesigning change with students (in some cases with kids as

young as fourth and fifth graders), has been used with over seven hundred educators since 2011 in workshops across the United States. My protocols for deep dives within a single site have been tested in schools or districts and in my own upper-division undergraduate/graduate course on design thinking at the University of Kentucky. The experiences of educators I have worked with at the elementary, middle, and high school levels are also included in this book as a way of showing how design thinking has resulted in solutions that have made a difference in the lives of educators and students.

It's through these settings and channels that I have also learned what can thwart design thinking and how to predict challenges schools may face as they take on the process. These hurdles are different at any given step of the process and can differ from challenges faced by designers in other settings.

One of the pressing problems for educators is how to serve all students equitably. In this book, I describe how schools have used design thinking to include the voices of students across the economic spectrum in both rural and urban settings. Design thinking gives leaders a natural opportunity to elevate the voices of those students who have been disenfranchised or overlooked and to empower them in the process.

My hope is that this book will move the conversation around school reform in a positive direction by enabling school leaders to leverage the collective wisdom and expertise of those around them. To borrow a phrase from David Weinberger, "the smartest person in the room is the room itself."<sup>1</sup> What's been missing up to this point are tools and processes that school leaders can use to tap into the wisdom of the people around them every day—their coworkers, fellow educators, students, and community members. Human-centered design allows superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders to see beyond what's within arm's reach and instead invent new solutions to challenges that until now have felt intractable.