CHAPTER ONE

Why Failure Is Not an Option

In times of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves beautifully equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.

—Eric Hoffer, Reflections on the Human Condition

In the spring of 1970, the Apollo 13 spaceship faced repeated crises as it circled the moon. Most Americans, including many of those working at NASA’s ground control center, gave up hope for the survival of the Apollo 13 crew. Newscaster Walter Cronkite described the challenge: “Perhaps never in human history has the entire world been so united by such a global drama.”

At one point, when the ground control team became aware of the ship’s inability to reach Earth with its current power supply, the director of flight operations, Gene Kranz, assembled the NASA team. He had been told that they had only 45 hours to get the astronauts home before the power ran out. Marking a point on the chalkboard halfway between their current position and Earth, he stated, “That’s not acceptable!”

The group exploded into a cacophony of reasons for their assessments and explanations of the limitations they faced. Then the voice of one team member rose above the rest to point out that everything
depended on power. Without power the astronauts would not be able
to communicate with the ground crews, they couldn’t correct their
trajectory or turn their heat shields around. Everything would have
to be turned off. Otherwise the craft would never make it to reentry.

When asked what he meant by “everything,” he replied “At the
current rate, in sixteen hours the battery is dead; so is the crew. We
have to get them down to 12 amps.”

The crowd erupted at this idea. “you can’t even run a vacuum
cleaner on 12 amps,” said one. Another objected to the idea of shut-
ting down everything, as he felt that the guidance system at least
must be kept running. Another NASA scientist was concerned that
this course of action had “never been tried before,” and still another
added that it had “never even been simulated.”

Scientific data eventually prevailed over the fear of the
unknown and the untried nature of the proposal to turn off
the power. Kranz was adamant in response to his crew’s fear of
the many unknowns, telling them they had to figure it out, that the
teams in the simulators would have to work out scenarios for re-
entry to Earth. He ordered them to find all the engineers and assem-
bly workers who had designed and put together all the switches,
circuits, light bulbs, everything connected to the power supply, and
to work out a way to reduce the use of every amp possible in the
spacecraft. Pointing at the mark he had made on the chalkboard, he
said, “I want this mark to go all the way back to Earth with time to
spare. We never lost a man in space, and we’re sure as hell not going
to do so on my watch!”

Gene Kranz’s motto was “failure is not an option.” And he
led his crew to success by bringing the astronauts safely back to
Earth.

**Failure Is Not an Educational Option**

Many educators would intuitively agree: Failure is not an option
for today’s students—at least not one we would conceivably choose.
Although clearly students *may* fail, and indeed many do, the conse-
quences are generally too dire to *allow* for such an option (Springfield,
1995). Students who don’t make it through high school earn substan-
tially less in wages (Springfield, 1995) and have far greater rates of
incarceration and drug abuse than do their peers (Woods, 2000).
Rosa Smith, former superintendent of the Columbus, Ohio, schools, had an epiphany one morning when she read some statistics about the U.S. prison population. Some 75% of the prison population, she found, is Latino or African-American, and 80% are functionally illiterate. She felt a new sense of purpose: Her work was no longer about teaching math or science, but about saving lives!

The ability to articulate such a clear and compelling message to all educational stakeholders—inside and outside of the school building—is the beginning of defining what Michael Fullan (2001a) refers to as “moral purpose.” Leaders who tap this clear sense of purpose in themselves and others are addressing the beginning of what we refer to in this book as the Courageous Leadership Imperative.

Many leaders have yet to discover their moral purpose or develop their courageous leadership abilities. One former superintendent, Rick DuFour, recounts his reaction to a superintendent who challenged the importance of educating all children to high standards. The superintendent told DuFour, “This isn’t brain surgery. No one is going to die here! Some kids advance a little, some a lot. Isn’t that the way it goes?” DuFour retorted that this cavalier attitude reminds him of a little office building he once saw in a small town. On the office door were posted two signs: “Veterinarian” and “Taxidermist.” Underneath was printed these words: “Either way you get your dog back!”

Failure is not an option for public schooling, either.

Leaders in Western society have long articulated the close tie between a strong public education system and democracy itself (Dewey, 1927; Glickman, 2003; Goodlad, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993). Schools are clearly for the common good, and they serve as the gateway to, and potential equalizer for, economic and life success for millions of under-served children.

As Michael Fullan states, “A high-quality public school system is essential, not only for parents who send their children to these schools but also for the public good as a whole” (2003a, p. 4). Failure is no more an option for the institution of public education than it is for the children within that institution (Glickman, 2003; Goodlad, 2001).

Yet we have seen countless threats to public schools in recent years. They include the rise of vouchers—even for religious schools (Walsh, 2002)—as well as the concerted entry of large, for-profit corporations into the public education arena. Moreover, it often appears that public policy itself is harmful to public education. Although
public officials call for “leaving no child behind,” they rarely accompany that call with adequate resources to meet the challenge. A greater level of courage and commitment are needed now—more than ever before, it seems—to meet these and other grave challenges.

THE AIM OF FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION: HOW HIGH-ACHIEVING SCHOOLS SUCCEED WITH ALL STUDENTS

How did Gene Kranz persevere under such dire circumstances and unrelenting odds during the Apollo crisis? What are the elements of this kind of courageous thinking and action, and how does one develop them? How could he harness the urgency of the situation, yet maintain his composure with three lives at stake and the whole world watching? What kind of organizational culture allows both for the open commentary from “naysayers” and for the ability to quickly move beyond those initial reactions to concerted teamwork?

This book addresses these questions with a unifying framework for action. Parker Palmer (1998) indicates that most professional development (and books like this) answer the “what” or “how” questions: What should I do, and how should I do it? This book answers these questions in detail. In addition, we address the two questions often ignored, yet crucial to success: Why am I doing this, and who do I need to be to succeed?

Perhaps more than in any other profession, educators have pursued their calling for a noble reason. Indeed, what could be more compelling than undertaking a profession that literally places the future of children in your hands?

Educators don’t have the “distractions” of fame and fortune to cloud their thinking about why they are here! So there must be another reason—a more profound why that leads to all the hours of toil, the deep concerns for the success of young people, the countless evenings and weekends attending plays and ball games.

Reconnecting with this why is imperative to sustaining one’s passion and focus in light of the barrage of attacks that public education, and all those involved with it, regularly endure. Standing up for why we are in this field is essential to our personal and professional well-being. Equally important, it is imperative for our very future—and that of our children. In this, failure is indeed not an option.
Ironically, the single most important element for success in any endeavor is often omitted from books such as this. While it is easy to focus on what others need to do, or on how to structure an organization, or on what policies need to be handed down to staff members, the real determinant of success will no doubt be you! You, the person reading this book. This book grapples—most notably in Chapter Two—with the thorny issue of introspection to assure external results. Make no mistake about it: Failure Is Not an Option begins with you!

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

*Failure Is Not an Option* begins in this chapter with an overarching “moral purpose” (Fullan, 2001a) for schools: *sustaining success for all students so that failure is not an option.* This answers the “Why are we in this profession?” question and provides coherent direction for our work.

The following chapter addresses the “who?” question by formalizing what we have discovered to be the mental framework of thousands of highly successful leaders. We call it the Courageous Leadership Imperative. The components of this imperative are described in Chapter 2, and specific examples and processes for developing this kind of courageous leadership are provided. Leaders of every variety can produce short-term gains in student achievement. A Courageous Leadership Imperative, however, is necessary to sustain significant gains. This is especially true under challenging circumstances. Leaders who adopt the five axioms that comprise this imperative are more likely than others to successfully adapt to shifts in educational spending, priorities, personnel, and policies. Ultimately, it is the internal strength of the leader and the school community that will act as ballast, rudder, and engine for the ship during stormy weather.

Chapter 3 gives a realistic depiction of the common factors that have derailed many change efforts. More important, it provides specific processes and strategies for keeping initiatives on track.

Chapter 4 provides an extensive research base to answer the “what?” question. It offers six principles for creating and sustaining a professional learning community. These principles are drawn from more than a decade of research on the topic and 15 years of practical
experience in the field. The research is clear: Building such a community is our best hope for sustained school success (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Drucker, 1992; Fullan, 1993; Joyce and Showers, 1995; Louis, Kruse, and Raywid, 1996; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Senge, 1990). How this community is defined, constructed, and sustained will be addressed beginning in Chapter 4.

Finally, we address the “how to?” question in Chapters 5 through 10. In these chapters we provide detailed, field-tested processes for creating professional learning communities in which failure is not an option.

In sum, this book builds on 15 years of intensive work with educational leaders to reshape school cultures for sustained student success. Our work began with W. Edwards Deming in 1988 and continued with the work of Peter Senge, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Maurice Elias, Shirley Hord, Rick DuFour, Robert Eaker, Kris Hipp, Tom Sergiovanni, and thousands of school leader-practitioners who have been at the forefront of creating true learning communities (Figure 1.1).

![Diagram of the book structure]

**Figure 1.1**

**BACKGROUND OF Failure Is Not an Option (FNO)**

This book is based on an extensive study of literature and practical research exploring high-performing schools and their ability to
increase and sustain high student achievement. The “how to” section of this book focuses on six principles of professional learning communities. They were originally captured in 2001 in a video series titled *Failure Is Not an Option*, featuring Michael Fullan, Rick DuFour, Barbara Eason-Watkins, Jay McTighe, Mike Schmoker, Steven Edwards, Deborah Wortham, and six award-winning principals and their staff members.

Both the video and this book describe the “what?” and the “how?” of creating a professional learning community in which failure is not an option. In addition, this book details specific processes for building and sustaining student achievement. Included are “case stories” of both turnaround schools and high-performing schools that have successfully used these processes. Most important, this book clarifies the “why?” and the “who?” of successful school change.

**WHY *FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION* NOW?**

**A NEW IMPERATIVE FOR A NEW CHALLENGE**

In times of great challenge or dynamic change, such as schools are now experiencing, organizations must develop cultures that are significantly different than those needed in stable times. Schools, like most organizations, tend to seek consistency and equilibrium. Yet, according to Richard Pascale’s (Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 2000) study of the life sciences, “Prolonged equilibrium is a precursor to disaster.” Avoiding equilibrium enables living organisms to avoid extinction in periods of great change.

Michael Fullan (2003a) advises educators to “move toward the danger” instead of hunkering down in difficult times. It is better to face the danger with a proactive approach than to wait for the danger to surprise you.

However, this is not at all easy. Most people are not easily swayed to “move toward the danger.” Schools facing the tremendous challenges posed by legislation that requires success for all children often end up using an array of approaches that actually prolong and even amplify the threats.

Two of the most common responses to the demands schools are facing are: avoiding the challenges at hand or, at the other extreme, embracing every possible solution to the point of losing focus. Others include:
1. Looking outside their own sphere of influence for reasons why students are not succeeding
2. Seeking a quick and easy solution
3. Avoiding or ignoring the data
4. Shooting the messenger
5. Total burnout and utter collapse

The Courageous Leadership Imperative described in the following chapter provides an alternative to these options. In unequivocal terms, it sets out the desired result and thus adds cohesion to change efforts with that aim. As such, it cuts through the many reasons to forestall meaningful action while minimizing less substantive, or even counterproductive, hyperaction.

In short, the Courageous Leadership Imperative deeply roots a school’s purpose and passions in ways that are enduring and stabilizing in the context of rapid change. At the same time, the professional learning community (proposed in Chapter 4) and processes for its implementation (Chapters 5–10) will help create a culture adaptable to extensive change. Knowing who we are as educators and leaders and why we are here provides an enduring source of strength. How we fulfill our individual and collective purpose, however, must be flexible and adaptable.

**PEOPLE: THE TOUGH PART OF CHANGE**

In *The Answer to How Is Yes*, Peter Block (2002) reflects on how so many of his major corporate clients refrain from committing to action, replacing action with an ingenious barrage of “how?” and “yeah, but...” questions and comments. Even when professionals know what to do and how to do it, they are often reluctant to take courageous action. Mark Twain once quipped: “Quitting smoking is easy—I’ve done it a thousand times!” Like the smoker who knows better or the gambler who occasionally wins, we can become wedded to what worked at one time or what works once in a while.

The human aspect of school change is the most difficult, yet essential, element for success. Perhaps because of this, it is often overlooked, minimized, or dismissed.
Without clearly addressing the human dimension of change—the “who?” and the “why?” of school reform—the outcomes of efforts to change will be disappointing. Tom Gregory (2001) encourages us to identify our barriers and proceed with courage:

I see most of the apparently formidable challenges to structural change in education as illusory. Many obstacles—even some scary ones—tend to evaporate when we muster the courage (or the effrontery) to push them aside. Most of the real obstacles to change are not “out there” but inside us. We each have our own collection of educational bogeymen who we’re afraid to confront. (p. 580)

Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council, summarized the challenge in our schools:

Only a small portion of what is known about quality staff development is regularly used in schools. The daily practice of teaching and leadership have been virtually untouched in most schools in spite of the investment of billions of dollars and a great deal of effort. (Sparks, 2002, p. 11–12)

Sparks (2002) goes on to describe the challenge as a human and emotional one as opposed to being mainly technical or cognitive.

This is true outside of education as well. Corporations now spend some $50 billion annually in fees for “change consultants” (Pascale, 1997–1999). And reports from the “changed” corporations indicate that a whopping 70% of those efforts fail (Pascale, 1998). Richard Pascale (Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 2000) attributes this to “social engineering.”

“Social” is coupled with “engineering” to denote that most managers today, in contrast to their nineteenth-century counterparts, recognize that people need to be brought on board. But they still go about it in a preordained fashion. Trouble arises because the “soft stuff” is really the hard stuff, and no one can really “engineer” it. (2000, p. 12)

This book provides direction and support for the difficult but essential “soft stuff.” Clearly defining who you are as a person and
as an organization, and why you are engaged in the endeavor of building and sustaining achievement for all students, provides the greatest hope for success.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS WORK

We approach the task of this book with both caveats and conviction. The first major caveat is that there is no formula for success.

The initial “formula” for success in the Apollo 13 example above had to be entirely tossed aside. It was replaced with processes for creating new approaches to success using data, past experience, a willingness to reconsider all assumptions, and the climate for challenging one another’s assumptions toward reaching a widely understood and commonly desired outcome.

Most important, this “case story” exemplifies the courageous leadership necessary—in the face of nearly certain failure—to maintain a sense of hope and optimism, composure and urgency. And to act on the best information possible toward what was ultimately a successful rescue of the three men in Apollo 13.

Formulas for success are suspect. As Peter Drucker stated, the reason we have so many gurus is because we can’t spell charlatan!

That being said, we do share some convictions and experience regarding “best practices” for reculturing schools toward sustainable student achievement, guiding principles for success, and using time-tested truths about leadership and implementation of initiatives, while taking into account the complexity of change.

The trick is sorting all this out, being accurate and precise without oversimplifying, and providing specific steps for action in the face of intricate challenges. That’s the balancing act this book aims to perform.

TAPPING GREAT WISDOM

Finally, we draw from an array of literature and practice from all areas, including organizational development technologies, educational change, professional learning communities, practice and research, enlightened corporate approaches to leadership development, youth psychology, and enduring wisdom of the past.
To that end, we fashion this book in terms described by last century’s leading champion for young people’s potential. Janusz Korczak directed a school for Jewish street children from 1912 to 1942, until Warsaw came under Nazi occupation, and Korczak voluntarily tied his fate with that of his street orphans:

This book is designed to be as short as possible because it is addressed primarily to a young colleague, who, suddenly thrown into the whirlpool of the most difficult educational problems, the most involved conditions of life, and now stunned and resentful, has sent out a cry for help.

A fatigued person cannot study thick volumes on education at night. One who is unable to get enough sleep will be incapable of implementing the precious principles he has learned. This shall be brief so that your night’s rest may not be disturbed. (Korczak, 1967)