# Taming the Turbulence in Educational Leadership

## Doing Right by Learners Without Losing Your Job

### Jennifer D. Klein

**Foreword by
Will Richardson**

**CORWIN**

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# FOREWORD

We live in a moment of profound turbulence—climate disruption, social fragmentation, political instability, and a mounting sense that many of our most cherished systems, including education, are no longer fit for the futures rushing toward us. The world that today's students are inheriting is not just uncertain—it is becoming unrecognizable. And yet, in so many schools, we carry on as if this moment is just a temporary disruption, a blip to be managed until things settle down.

But this isn't a blip. It's a rupture.

Jennifer D. Klein's *Taming the Turbulence in Educational Leadership* is a courageous and essential contribution to the work of educational leadership in this moment—not because it offers simple solutions, but because it refuses to look away. It names the increasing pushback against equity and inclusion work, as well as learner-centered innovation, in schools. It surfaces the deep emotional toll that this resistance takes on educators and students alike. And perhaps most importantly, it offers strategies for navigating these polarized times without compromising the moral core of what it means to serve young people.

I want to acknowledge the tension of writing this foreword as a white man, especially for a book so deeply rooted in justice, inclusion, and the lived experiences of those who have been historically excluded from educational leadership spaces. I don't take that lightly. We are long past the point where silence equals neutrality. Those of us with social and institutional privilege have a responsibility not to speak *for* others, but to speak *with* clarity about the systems we benefit from and to use our voices to open space, not occupy it. I'm hopeful my contribution here might open a few more doors or ears and serve as an entree to explore the deeper truths this book so powerfully holds.

As someone who writes about the intersection of complexity, collapse, and educational transformation, I resonate deeply with Klein's framing. Our schools are not separate from the systems unraveling around them—they are embedded within them. In fact, too often, schools mirror the very logics of extraction, competition, and disconnection that have brought us to this point. When education centers compliance over inquiry, performance over

purpose, and test scores over well-being, it prepares students not for thriving in a turbulent world, but for surviving within a broken one.

And yet, what if schools could be different?

What if educational leaders saw themselves not just as protectors of systems, but as *hospice workers*—helping to tenderly let go of what no longer serves—and as *midwives*, making space for what is trying to be born?

Klein's book offers a roadmap for that kind of leadership. She speaks honestly about fear, resistance, and burnout—but she doesn't stop there. She speaks also of courage, of community, and of the power of adaptive leadership grounded in relationship. Her emphasis on rightful presence, identity responsive pedagogy, and learner agency aligns closely with what's being called ***relational intelligence***—the capacity to navigate a world in flux by cultivating empathy, systems thinking, and deep connection to one another, to place, and to all of the life that surrounds us.

This work is not easy. But it is necessary.

As the metacrisis deepens and the future becomes less about bouncing back and more about adapting forward, educational leadership must become more imaginative, more grounded, and more willing to challenge the narratives that no longer serve. That includes rethinking what we mean by success, how we define progress, and how we honor the dignity of every learner. The leaders whose stories Klein shares are doing just that despite the strong preservational pull of the status quo.

I'm grateful for this book not because it promises safety, but because it provides solidarity. It reminds us that we are not alone in this work, even when it feels like the ground is shifting beneath our feet. And it dares us to believe that even amidst collapse, we can build something better.

Will Richardson
https://futureserious.school/

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been the hardest project I've taken on in years, and I owe a debt of gratitude to all the friends and colleagues who helped along the way. Thanks to Kelsey Vrooman, who helped me envision and reenvision the goals of this book repeatedly, and who pushed me to embrace AI for organizing transcripts and pulling quotations from the interviews. Thanks also to Jill Ackers for being a valuable critical friend who didn't let me wallow in imposter syndrome, and to Kapono Ciotti, whose wisdom and grounding have been incredibly valuable. I am grateful to my leadership coach and friend Robin Whitacre for her insightful and compassionate support during my years in school leadership and for introducing me to folks at Corwin. Thank you to my father for pushing through fear to choose learner-centered schools for me, and for teaching me to act in the face of injustice. And thank you to my sister for everything, always.

I want to express my gratitude to the sixty-seven leaders who shared their stories with me and to recognize the courage it takes to stand up for learners in our current educational climate. Thanks to Michael Adams for helping me with the initial networking that got me started with Latin American leaders in particular, and to Margaret Wheatley for letting me take her course for free when I was struggling with the book and needed more community with educational leaders. I know there are millions of other leaders I didn't hear from, courageous individuals who work every day for equity and student well-being, who have dedicated themselves to what they believe school could be and have a compelling vision for change. I worked through my networks to find the leaders whose stories appear in this book, and I'll spend the rest of my life meeting leaders I'll wish I'd known sooner and had been able to include. This book is for all of you, for the hard work you do every day to make sure every child has meaningful and joyful school experiences.

I'd like to acknowledge and thank Carmen Coleman, whose metaphor became the title of this book. I couldn't have come up with a better way to express the polarization and challenge we are facing in education right now than "taming the turbulence," and I am honored that Carmen allowed me to use her words as the title and frame for the leadership stories this book contains. As always, I also want to thank educational leaders Arnie Langberg

and Judith Baenen for helping foster my growth as a writer and leader, and for shaping so much of how I think about education. Without your support, inspiration, and guidance along the way, this book wouldn't exist.

It's important to acknowledge the young people who did *not* receive the kind of supportive education they deserved because they didn't go to schools with courageous leaders willing (or able) to make the extra effort to improve their systems. This includes someone I never met, nine-year-old Jamel Myles, who took his own life days after coming out as gay in a public school in Colorado because the bullying he experienced was so severe. It also includes my own *hija de corazón,* Jessica, who was deeply traumatized by an education that made her feel othered and inadequate; and Federico, the first student who ever came out of the closet to me. My work springs from my enduring hope that no young person will ever have to go through what you did again.

I'd like to recognize the editors at Corwin, who embraced my work and were willing to take on such a challenging topic, as well as all of my peer reviewers and critical friends. While several publishers in the US have stopped books on DEI work mid-production in 2025, Corwin has consistently supported the project and even encouraged me to be bolder. In particular, thanks to Dan Alpert for championing the project and for the keen insights he offered on the final manuscript. I'd also like to thank Megan Bedell for carrying the project forward and bolstering my confidence along the way. It takes a village, as they say. And thank you to Drea for her patient, detail-oriented support with copyright permissions, interviewee corrections, and communications; with sixty-seven individuals involved, I couldn't have done it without her.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge that I've been writing this book during periods of extreme duress and war in several parts of the world, including Ukraine, Sudan, and the Middle East, a region that holds great personal significance for me. These conflicts—and other, less violent struggles—have a direct impact on learners, families, educators, and school leaders. Nowhere is this more salient than in Gaza, where an estimated 65,000 children were unable to access education at the beginning of the 2024–25 school year, according to the *Washington Post* (September 12, 2024). Most of these young people have been unschooled for over a year as a result of the war. According to UNICEF, 70 percent of young people in South Sudan have no access to basic K–12 education, and two-thirds of students in frontline regions of Ukraine have had their education disrupted since 2022. War always divides and disrupts the basic right to education, and this carries lasting impacts on a country's ability to self-govern, to foster professionals in all fields, and to ensure the well-being of young people in their communities. I saw amazing collaboration among international schools when the war began in Ukraine, with schools in Poland and other neighboring countries bringing families, teachers, and administrators from Ukrainian schools into their communities. But not all countries in conflict have

neighbors who will accept their refugees, nor do all citizens have the means or ability to leave. While these challenges are more extreme than those faced by the leaders in this book, I must acknowledge the incredible barriers that educators, learners, families and school leaders are facing in these regions.

May all children receive the quality education they deserve, and may education have a hand in creating a more peaceful, sustainable future.

## PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jennifer D. Klein** is a product of experiential project-based education herself, and she lives and breathes the student-centered pedagogies used to educate her. She became a teacher during graduate school in 1990, quickly finding the intersection between her love of writing and her fascination with educational transformation and its potential impact on social change. She spent nineteen years in the classroom, including several years in Costa Rica and eleven in all-girls education, before leaving the classroom to support educators' professional learning in public, private, and international schools. Motivated by her belief that all children deserve a meaningful, relevant education like the one she experienced herself, and that giving them such an education will catalyze positive change in their communities and beyond, Jennifer strives to inspire educators to shift their practices in schools worldwide.

Jennifer is committed to intersecting globally connected student-centered learning with identity-responsive and anti-racist teaching practices, and her experience includes deep work with schools seeking to address equity, take on brave conversations, build healthier communities, and improve identity politics on campus. She has a broad background in global education and partnership development, student-centered instructional strategies, diversity and inclusivity work, student-led evaluation, outdoor education, and experiential, inquiry-driven learning. She has facilitated workshops in English and Spanish on four continents, providing the strategies for high-quality, globally connected project-based learning in a myriad of cultural and socioeconomic contexts, with an emphasis on amplifying student voice and shifting school culture to support such practices.

Jennifer has worked with organizations such as the Buck Institute for Education, the Center for Global Education at the Asia Society, The Institute of International Education, Fulbright Japan, What School Could Be, the Centre

for Global Education, TakingITGlobal, and the World Leadership School, among others. Most recently, she served as Head of School at Gimnasio Los Caobos (Bogotá, Colombia) for three years, where she was able to put her educational thinking into practice with profound impact on the quality of student learning and their growth as agents of change.

Jennifer's first book, *The Global Education Guidebook: Humanizing K–12 Classrooms Worldwide Through Equitable Partnerships*, was published in 2017, and her second book, *The Landscape Model of Learning: Designing Student-Centered Experiences for Cognitive and Cultural Inclusion,* coauthored with Kapono Ciotti, was published in 2022. She holds a bachelor of arts from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and a master of arts from the University of Colorado at Boulder, both in literature and creative writing. Additionally, Jennifer completed her principal licensing studies at the University of Denver. She currently lives in Denver, Colorado. Learn more about bringing Jennifer to your school or conference at www.principledlearning.org.

*What gives light must endure burning.*

—Viktor Frankl

*For my nieces, Ella and Alex,*
*and for my* nietos de corazón, *Isabella, Camila, and Leo,*
*with hope for the world that awaits you*

*And for my mother, Sally Reba Vexler Klein*
*(July 3, 1940–November 13, 2019)*
*who taught me to fight for justice and work for peace*

# WHY THIS, WHY NOW
*An Introduction*

> *Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. . . . To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to "go for broke." Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen.*
>
> —James Baldwin, from *A Talk to Teachers*

I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I knew I wanted to talk with educational leaders willing to share their stories and experiences in contexts that push back, to connect with leaders doing right by learners no matter what the resistance or downright opposition they might face. But when the first school leader asked if they could remain anonymous, I realized this topic was going to pull me—and my interviewees—in directions that felt challenging, if not downright dangerous. The tensions are symptomatic of why this project is so urgent: We are educating in an era of extreme polarization all over the world, especially when it comes to ensuring every child receives the education they need and deserve, and our schools are in the eye of the storm.

Educators are facing an unprecedented level of resistance to identity-responsive initiatives and pedagogical innovations around the world, particularly where equity is the goal. Whether the reasons are political, religious, cultural or otherwise, education is under significant threat. Regional laws in states like Florida are eroding not just what we can teach in schools, but how we are allowed to respond to the needs of LGBTQ+ students and learners of color. And it's not just happening in the United States—backlash against student-centered education and diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging

work is appearing across the world. Conservative governments and parent groups are creating monumental roadblocks for educators, adhering more and more vehemently to inherently inequitable systems rather than changing them. Right-wing, conservative thought is reemerging on a global scale, and funding for special education and protections that ensure educational well-being for neurodivergent learners and students with disabilities are being upended. Meanwhile, the battle against diversity, equity and inclusion of students from all cultures and races, as well as all sexual and gender identities, rages on. Curricular restrictions are increasing rapidly, as are laws restricting the use of chosen pronouns and names and transgender children's participation in sports, even in the PreK–12 arena. Critical Race Theory, an approach that helps learners understand how the historical patterns of systemic racism impact their lives today, has been weaponized by opponents. The future of education feels increasingly uncertain and fragile. Every day, we see more calls for a return to "classical education" and traditional values, more laws and restrictions and expectations for educators to navigate while they try to prioritize what their learners actually need to grow and thrive.

In some places, the laws are contradictory, as in one region of Mexico which requires all students and staff use the bathroom of their sex at birth, as well as their legal names and pronouns, while simultaneously suggesting that gender identity must be respected. What we have students read is under attack as well; as a former English teacher, I'm mortified to see so many important titles landing on the censorship lists. None of us became educators to censor what students can explore and understand about themselves or the world around them, and educators know how essential it is for students to see themselves reflected in the work they read—and to understand a wide variety of experiences and perspectives beyond their own. But here we are. And as Ted Dintersmith—founder of the nonprofit organization What School Could Be and the man behind the film *Most Likely to Succeed*—told me, every minute we spend worrying about library books or which histories we should teach takes us away from preparing students for the world. We can't sit at the captain's table on the Titanic, arguing over the food—the iceberg is coming regardless.

The effects of this iceberg are paralyzing and polarizing, and leaders risk losing their jobs over doing what they know their learners need and deserve—changes educators know will help them serve every child but which some parents and policy makers consider controversial. Even when opponents are few, they tend to be the loudest members of our communities. With wolves at the door, school leaders take risks with every choice they make: whether to allow teachers to display inclusion symbols, whether to resist the pressure to censor reading, whether to shift instruction and pedagogy so that all students thrive . . . or not.

We are educators. We educate because we want every child to enjoy a safe, appropriately challenging school environment where they experience the

best conditions possible for growth. But we need to keep our jobs to be able to lead this fight, and the next one, and that's not always easy. Dr. Michael Adams,[3] Executive Director of the Tri-Association of American Schools in Mexico, Central America, Colombia and the Caribbean, believes that school leaders today have to be willing to declare openly what they'd put their jobs on the line for, and to be clear about which hills they're willing to die on (see the full list of Interview Participants on page 257). When he led schools in Latin America himself, Adams knew which topics he would walk away over, and he almost lost his job because of a shift toward problem-based work in math curriculum and instruction at one school he led. But not all heads are prepared to lose their jobs to protect a child or a teacher, much less an idea about what education could look like. Leaders need to find solutions that allow us to do right by our learners without putting ourselves or our teachers in front of the firing squad.

I was burned by these challenges myself, ultimately becoming the scapegoat for pushback against student-centered, authentic learning in a pedagogically traditional context. As a head of school at Gimnasio Los Caobos, a PreK–12 school outside of Bogotá, Colombia, I strove to spread new ideas about why learning should be more authentic and inclusive, to assuage parents' fears over their kids getting an education that didn't look like their own, to leverage students' and teachers' voices when we wanted to make improvements, and to protect myself and my teachers when the attacks came. These are the things they don't teach educational leaders in graduate school: how to help angry parents understand the value of equity and student-centered learning, how to deal with regional accountability systems that still require grades and exams while simultaneously ensuring all work is authentic and student-centered, how to transform school cultures where compliance has always been the goal. I did the best I could, worked consistently with a leadership coach, and trusted my instincts—but even so, I've suffered with severe imposter syndrome since I left school leadership in 2020. I wish I'd had the kind of toolkit that I hope this book provides and had known how to respond to obstacles with a little more understanding and a lot less anger.

Few industries have struggled as much as education has to innovate and evolve—and as the obstacles and restrictions increase, teachers are fleeing the profession in droves. For decades, because educational systems made innovation so challenging, the only way to successfully lead more student-centered and equitable learning and teaching has been through "alternative" public schools and programs, through micro "school within a school" programs inside larger, more traditional institutions, through private schools not subjected to governmental oversight, or through after-school programming. And yes, change is hard in any industry. According to Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, in their work on immunity to change, ". . . the change challenges today's leaders and their subordinates face are not, for the most part, a problem of will. The problem is the inability to close the gap between what we genuinely, even passionately, *want* and what we are actually *able* to do"

(2009, p. 2). Kegan and Lahey point out that ". . . for each of us to deliver on our biggest aspirations—to take advantage of new opportunities or meet new challenges—we must grow into our future possibilities. [Effective] leaders know what makes that more possible—and what prevents it" (p. 11).

The forms of education I champion today are not new; many of these approaches were established by John Dewey in the early 1900s, and championed by thought leaders like Paulo Freire in the 1970s and bell hooks in the 1980s, yet we are still disappointingly far from accomplishing what they envisioned. Sir Ken Robinson died in 2020 frustrated by the lack of progress in education over the last one hundred years, and Dr. Elliot Washor,[53] Co-Founder of Big Picture Learning, told me the same: "I'm shocked at how little has changed. . . . [Educators'] challenges are the same challenges that have always been around: the policies around standardized testing, the policies around time constraints, what you can do, and the ways you can do things in school."

Ron Berger,[9] Senior Advisor for EL Education, previously known as the Expeditionary Learning Network, pointed out that it's not the first time we've seen such polarization. Remembering the political and social polarization of the 1960s, Berger pointed out that while the tendency to divide is common enough throughout US history, the politization of education through a culture of fear and division is relatively new. Sadly, it's not just a US trend, either; increased social and political polarization is occurring across cultures and contexts. From what I've seen, the more divided a given organization or society becomes, the more challenging growth and innovation tend to be. Weighed down by the push and pull of polarized priorities and opinions, political or otherwise, staying focused on what children need from their education becomes harder than ever. School leaders can easily lose sight of students as we manage these polarities in schools: teaching all histories vs. teaching limited versions of the past; supporting marginalized students vs. prioritizing uniformity; giving schools instructional autonomy and flexibility vs. tightly controlling educators' choices; meeting the expectations of caregivers vs. meeting the needs of their children. Students are the ones who experience the good, bad, and ugly of this binary thinking, which has become so divisive that many school board meetings in the US end in shouting matches and even physical violence. But none of the leaders I spoke with saw the choices behind those polarities as serving one group *versus* another; instead, they spoke about the importance of supporting *all* students, and about making decisions that would benefit *all* learners, if in different ways according to their different needs.

In *Polarity Management* (2014), Barry Johnson, PhD., looks at these "either/or" binaries, writing of leaders who are encouraged to move from rigidity (which the author believes is connected to valuing clarity) to flexibility (which Johnson defines as connected to ambiguity), as though one is a solution to the other (p. xviii). In reality, we often polarize in the search for solutions rather than recognizing that both could be true—and in the

case of school leaders, a willingness to be clear *and* flexible is better than an either/or solution, just as we need both vulnerability *and* expertise.

Binary thinking increasingly dominates human interactions, setting up false dichotomies as though only one reality can be true. The more binary our thinking becomes, the less we engage with nuance and complexity, the more we see ideas as mutually exclusive, and the more we lock down in argumentative patterns in an attempt to "win." Author Zoe Weil takes this idea further, insisting that there is always an entire spectrum of possible solutions—and much of her work focuses on developing students' "solutionary" mindsets through project- and problem-based pedagogies in the classroom (2024). Weil frames a solutionary mindset as one "that resists arbitrary either/or statements and seeks to carefully identify underlying problems and approach them as solvable" (p. 10). Unfortunately, Weil believes this mindset is "not our default," writing that "as soon as we frame a problem as an either/or, we tend to miss the entire spectrum of possible solutions that exist between and beyond the two sides" (p. 10).

False dichotomies can be particularly dangerous in education, as failing to recognize nuance impedes personalization and suggests that all students need exactly the same thing. According to Melissa Riley in her article for the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, false dichotomies are dangerous for leaders, teachers, and learners, particularly when they impact how we think about pedagogy (2025). For example, she notes the following false dichotomies in education, all of which continue to "duke it out in the ring," as she puts it, as though only one is the "right" way to educate:

- Knowledge vs. Skills

- Play vs. Academics

- Practical vs. Theoretical thinking

- Mandated curriculum vs. Teacher autonomy

- Academic results vs. Inclusion

- Empathy vs. Effectiveness (for leaders)

In the examples Riley spotlights, binary thinking leads educators down a dangerous path in which good practices become mutually exclusive, yet these false dichotomies dominate conversations about education—as well as the political landscape. The more we can focus on avoiding polarization and pay attention to what students need, the more educational leaders can become pluralistic "solutionaries" ourselves.

Resistance comes in many forms, and I've tried to include a variety of challenges to change in this book. While the most obvious pushback comes from state or federal legislation that controls schools' choices, the resistance is often more subtle—and in many cases it comes from inside our communities. Parent

groups that push hard on legislators with an eye to conservative values are advancing initiatives like book banning, limited versions of history, and the elimination of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging work, the last of which was banned and weaponized on a federal level by the US administration in 2025. Caregivers may also struggle with an education that looks different from their own experiences, particularly if their education has led to success.

The same is true for teachers and students. More traditionally minded teachers working from the "laminated lesson plans" they've used for decades often struggle to shift practices because they believe students only learn when sitting in rows, listening to the teacher, and taking notes they'll spit back later on a quiz or exam. Initiatives that require additional work from teachers don't always succeed, either, as overwhelmed educators are rarely able to innovate. Furthermore, students who have learned the "game of school" and excel within memorization-oriented, standards- and exam-based structures are often paralyzed when asked to think for themselves. The perception that student-centered learning feels more like play than academic learning can evoke fear in parents, teachers, and students alike. And while their voices may not be as loud in the public arena as a group like Moms for Liberty, a few vocal community members can easily derail good work in a school. A poor leadership hire derailed much of the student agency and school culture developed at one school I worked with, effectively shifting the culture back to a top-down hierarchy in just a few months. And my interviews uncovered too many similar examples.

But the good news is that we *do* have incredible leaders in schools all over the world, leaders who refuse to give in to the pressure to do anything other than what students need most. This book is grounded in real conversations, in real stories from leaders who are showing up every day to do the hard work, courageous leaders who offered their stories and strategies to help others succeed. Many of these leaders have asked to remain anonymous, and I am grateful for the trust it took to share their experiences with me at all. Given that I wrote this book with the goal of supporting leaders under fire, it would be counterproductive if this book worked *against* their continued efforts, so I have honored all requests for anonymity—and I discourage readers from trying to figure out who they are. After all, as a superintendent in the American Southwest who we're calling Caroline Danvers[17] pointed out during our interview, "When you're working in this space where folks are looking for you, you have to turn out the lights." Whether they're practicing what Mari Jones[34] at the High Tech High Graduate School of Education calls "creative noncompliance" quietly or loudly, these leaders are making education better for their students and are reimagining the rules of the game. In the process, they are improving the lives of their students, teachers, and broader communities by redefining what education could (and should) include.

This book contains stories from leaders in all kinds of schools, stories which spotlight a variety of contexts with different challenges to educational

change. On these pages, you'll find stories from public school leaders who have accomplished remarkable things in contexts where parent groups and legislators are working to undermine their initiatives. In several parochial school examples, you'll read about leaders championing student-centered learning and finding creative ways to champion LGBTQ+ inclusion in spite of strong religious orientations that challenge such thinking. And in independent and international schools, you'll find the stories of leaders who, in many cases, see private schools as the front lines of innovation, places that can provide a sort of "proof of concept" by working outside the official governmental system, and such schools offer precedents that leaders in more restrictive contexts and institutions can benefit from. One leader in Colombia, for example, told me I *should* name him and his school because of the potential to influence broader educational systems across the country; by reputation alone, his community has the opportunity to support significant change in his region every time they take on a potentially controversial initiative.

Ultimately, this book is not a "how to" guide that provides definitive answers for how to lead change, nor do I espouse a particular change management theory. Instead, this book contains a collection of real stories about the myriad ways leaders are championing innovation and equity in their unique contexts. I hope readers will find stories and strategies that resonate, that feel relevant to your own contexts and challenges. Personally, I have learned something from every one of them.

My interviews quickly surfaced two main avenues of equity work in schools that are receiving opposition. In my first interview question, I asked leaders to tell me about an initiative they're proud of that has garnered resistance, and these two strands emerged from leaders' responses:

1. Pedagogical and instructional innovations that prioritize student-centered learning, helping ensure all students learn and thrive, regardless of where they live and attend school. This includes schools that are redefining what they mean by success and are ensuring innovation and opportunity for *all* learners, particularly through career technical education and cognitively- and physically-responsive practices. Many of these schools are innovating outside the system when necessary, are finding ways to innovate in more academically-driven contexts, and are working to sustain innovation.

2. Identity-responsive programming and equity work that honors place, culture, and learners' full spectrum of identities, perspectives and needs, ensuring all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, are supported for who they are, and feel safe and appreciated as individuals. This includes schools that are prioritizing culturally responsive learning and teaching in communities of color and Indigenous schools, social-emotional learning and wellness initiatives, gender and sexual identity inclusion, and programs that support critical thinking, pluralism, and intercultural competency development.

▶ As we'll explore in Chapter 6, many schools are struggling with the best way to describe equity work, and some have replaced the J in DEIJ with a B for Belonging (since *justice* suggests there are real systemic injustices that many people deny exist). Others have dropped the acronym entirely and are calling their work *belonging* efforts; after all, who can disagree that all learners deserve to feel a sense of belonging at school? In the winter of 2025, the US administration mandated the removal of all references to DEI in policy and practice, weaponizing it as a term connected to "woke" ideologies and a perceived threat on white identities and systems. This mandate connects funding to compliance, requiring that school leaders develop policies that won't be challenged or risk losing federal funding for things like free lunch for learners experiencing poverty or resources for special education. Unfortunately, many conservatives recognize *belonging* as code for DEI, which makes the term problematic as well.

The term *inclusion* has its own challenges, however. The word *inclusion* comes originally from efforts to meet the cognitive needs of all students, particularly neurodiverse learners, but it is used increasingly for any effort focused on all students feeling safety and belonging at school and being able to thrive and grow through personalized and identity-responsive practices. But while inclusion feels like a positive term and is used regularly by educators, including my use of it in this book, the term actually signals a power dynamic that isn't so positive. To "include" means that someone has the power to include or not, a bit like giving someone permission to enter your home—I'll "let" you enter my space, but I'll decide where you get to sit. In schools, educators have the power to include or not, to invite in or leave out; for example, many teachers decide where learners are allowed to sit and when they're allowed to move or talk. Many educators even use the language of power and control when they talk about "letting" students have voice and protagonism or include "students must . . ." language in their planning.

When Kapono Ciotti and I were researching for *The Landscape Model of Learning* (2022), we discovered the term "rightful presence" in the work of Angela Calabrese Barton and Edna Tan (2020), which I'll explore more in Chapter 2. The term comes originally from the sanctuary city movement in the United States, in which certain cities choose to protect immigrants and measure the extent to which those individuals are experiencing full rights in their communities. Calabrese Barton and Tan apply the term to education in powerful ways, positioning learners as inherently deserving of full rights inside their learning environments. Ciotti and I concluded that rightful presence was a much more positive and appropriate term for what most educators actually intend when they use the word inclusion, as it signals the inherent right of every child to feel belonging in the classroom and to bring their whole selves to their learning spaces and experiences.

Similarly, there is a growing movement toward the word *dignity* in place of belonging or inclusion. A less controversial term than inclusion or equity, dignity signals that every human in a given environment is respected and valued for their own sake. Because of its connection to the more

conservative language of Catholic doctrine, which speaks to the "dignity of the human person" in more religious terms, the word dignity can be especially useful in parochial schools or religious cultures trying to work toward more holistic inclusion for all community members. Like rightful presence, a human's dignity is inherent, not provided or allowed by others, so it applies to every "human person" as they are, all elements of identity and experience included.

Whatever the terms you choose to use in your leadership work, it's important to remember how much language defines how a community thinks about the school's intentions; the language we use shapes the way others see what we're trying to describe, a topic we'll explore more deeply in Chapter 6. Finding the right words to express what we really intend—that align with our vision of what's possible but don't trigger our constituents—isn't just an exercise in semantics or a strategy to avoid strong reactions; it is also evidence of our purpose in action.

I am saddened to see so much fear among educators. There's really nothing radical about any of the movements leaders shared; many have a long history and most are responses to the actual needs of students in our classrooms right now, wherever we might be educating, as well as the realities of the world we are preparing our learners for. As our societies become increasingly polarized, teachers and leaders have an opportunity to use education to develop students' skills in areas like kindness and constructive critical dialogue—but this can be difficult when educators fear for their jobs and livelihoods. I've written before about the Buddhist idea of the Middle Path, about recognizing that the best thinking usually comes not from the extreme ends of any spectrum, but from a Middle Path that recognizes all points of view and strives to meet the needs of all community members, even in situations of division. This book espouses a Middle Path as well. There are systems in place which will take time to shift, and there are deeply entrenched opinions at stake, so the real question in many schools, at least for now, is how leaders might elevate innovation and equity while still meeting the demands of existing systems and constituents. It will take time to remove these broader obstacles, and many of the leaders you'll meet on these pages are impacting policy as much as local opinion—or are striving to do so. But a Middle Path mentality and a recognition that we can't just ignore the systems that push back may help us transform thinking, particularly among more transactionally oriented parents.

Not all of the stories I heard had a happy ending, and I am grateful to the leaders who leaned into vulnerability to share stories that didn't end so well. Several told me they felt they'd failed, hadn't moved quickly enough, or hadn't served students well in the most urgent moments. Not all of them kept their jobs, either, but they hope their experiences help other leaders avoid similar pitfalls. In Hawai'i, an anonymous former school leader we will call Joanne Marshall[40] told me the story of incredible innovation and

transformation under her leadership as high school principal, followed by a change in school president that undid everything she'd worked so hard to put in place. Marshall questioned whether she had anything to offer for this book, in spite of being applauded as one of the best educational leaders in the state during her tenure. In California, Tanya Sheckley[49] had to leave the public system to better serve neurodivergent and physically disabled young people, and she lamented that serving learners well required creating a private school with better systems instead of transforming the public system itself. A leading assessment organization backtracked on a professional learning curriculum that included the equity challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth and educators, ultimately capitulating to internal and external pressures and removing all references to such "identities." In Latin America, an anonymous leader we will call Patricia Hannon,[30] who *has* successfully championed LGBTQ+ students, family and staff, bemoaned how slow the progress has been. She worried openly that not only did she fail the students who needed her to move more quickly but that she will continue to fail students who need more decisive action than her community is ready to take.

But these perceived failures *did* make a difference for as many students as these leaders impacted, for as long as the work lasted—and they demonstrate the passion and purpose so many leaders bring to their work: to make education better for all learners regardless of the personal cost. Furthermore, they demonstrate what Brené Brown champions in her work on leadership across sectors: the power of naming, acknowledging, and inviting collective engagement around fear and uncertainty (2018). Coauthors Hughes et al. (2022) found that such characteristics are key to effective leadership, particularly during times of polarization and conflict.

> We suggest practices such as these are more critical during these turbulent times when school leaders must navigate (even more) between constantly shifting state and district directives, community expectations and backlash, and being responsive to the youth, faculty, staff, and families in their school communities—all while remembering to attend to their own health and well-being (p. 6).

While most cultures expect leaders to be strong, firm and decisive, these authors remind us that collective engagement around fear and uncertainty, and the willingness to be vulnerable in the face of complexity, may be just as important as the expertise leaders strive to project.

One of my favorite ideas came from Dr. Carmen Coleman,[15] Chief of Transformational Learning and Leading for the Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative in Kentucky, who has led several districts in the state. On a flight back to Kentucky after a visit to High Tech High, the turbulence on the plane offered a metaphor Coleman now lives and works by: We are facing turmoil in education, and the job of good leaders is to "tame the turbulence."

As Coleman sees it, educators have been caught in this turbulence; it permeates our profession and we haven't been able to rise above it. As a result, it is the role of leaders to help teachers see how even small, simple shifts can change a child's experience of school. Adrian Leece,[39] General Director at the John F. Kennedy American School of Querétaro in Central Mexico, called the backlash school leaders are experiencing the *weather*, noting that the broader *climate* we cultivate is what matters. This thinking has allowed him to focus less on sudden storms and more on the broader climate students deserve to experience at school.

Many leaders mentioned that students know what they need from their education and community, a clear sign that *adults* create the turbulence more than young people do. As Two Roads Education Founder and Strategist Robert Landau[37] told me, based on an extensive career leading schools globally, "The greatest barrier to providing the education our kids need are the adults who already had one." I couldn't agree more. In one of the best stories I heard, the leader we are calling Patricia Hannon[30] told me about the gender transition of a five-year-old in her kindergarten program. The parents informed her of their child's social transition just before an extended holiday, and Hannon spent much of the break working with the school administration, parents and teachers to make sure the community was ready for the child to return as a fully-presenting girl, with female clothing and a new name aligned to her transition. Hannon was in the classroom waiting to greet the family on the first day back, and she saw another five-year-old run up to the child, give her a hug, and tell her she was beautiful. As Hannon pointed out, visibly moved as she remembered the moment, most of the challenges around acceptance and equity come from the paradigms and preconceived notions adults have accumulated, not from the children themselves.

My high school principal and mentor Arnie Langberg,[36] founding principal of my alma mater, the Open School in Colorado, told me that *creating the world that ought to be,* an Open School learning objective and the title of his memoir, requires that leaders stay tied to our vision of what's possible and build it from scratch, rather than letting ourselves get mired down by all the obstacles and challenges. This is precisely why Langberg calls himself a "radical" educator rather than a "rebel," as his career has been focused not on rebelling against what already exists so much as crafting something better, something new. Conversely, authors and business leaders Adam Morgan and Mark Barden invite us to consider the constraints we face as "a stimulus for positive change," and they issue a challenge I kept in mind as I spoke with leaders: ". . . we can choose to use [a constraint] as an impetus to explore something new and arrive at a breakthrough. Not in spite of the constraint, but because of it" (2015, p. 4). The idea of using discord to get to something better is a powerful way to reimagine the work of leadership.

In *Restoring Sanity* (2024), Margaret J. Wheatley reminds us that crisis can be a powerful starting place as well, writing, ". . . it is possible to use a crisis

or invasion as the moment to gather together and create a shared sense of purpose and meaning. In the midst of fear and uncertainty, many people search to find their ground. You'll discover people usually are eager to participate" (pp. 36-37). It feels almost impossible to imagine how discord could lead to unity, but school leaders who have navigated significant conflict often reach the same conclusion. Tim Carr,[12] a former international school leader who faced explosive challenges in various settings, put it this way:

> As much as we humans try to keep our worlds constant and predictable so that we feel some comfort or respite from constant newness, in both our work and leisure lives, we'd do better to embrace new elements as opportunities for learning, growth, and wholeness. The same goes for conflict and strife. If we welcome disagreements and other viewpoints as chances to stretch and enrich our thinking, we learn to surf the waves of discord rather than getting pummeled by them.

As much as I struggled with opposition and resistance as a leader myself, and left the role feeling seriously "pummeled," I do believe in the potential for change, even among adults. Regardless of whether I reached everyone in my community, I saw a shift in thinking over the three years I led Gimnasio Los Caobos. And I believe that educators can and should make choices based on what students need most, that on an inherent level humans are capable of being as inclusive and kind as that five-year-old who immediately accepted her transgender peer in Latin America. Many leaders mentioned that they work to keep students' needs—and voices—at the center of the work they're doing, what Janelle Field,[24] Lead Instructional Coach in rural Minnesota and Change Agent for the What School Could Be organization, calls keeping "learners on the agenda." Robert Landau notes in an article that the worst practices we're seeing in schools amount to malpractice and that we do harm in part because we've never asked educators to take something akin to a Hippocratic oath that defines *growth toward students' potential* as the goal (2024). After all, if our first goal isn't to determine what would be best for students, we probably shouldn't be leading educational institutions.

Every conversation I had was loaded with passion and purpose, a reminder of how much love and dedication educational leadership requires. Adrian Leece[39] pointed out that we don't become educators to fight with parents or ministries of education; we do this work because we care about young people and because we recognize that making a difference in the life of even one child is worth the effort. Leading change and challenging our communities isn't about winning the fight, according to Leece—it's about understanding why we're encountering resistance, staying determined in our choices when we know they're best for learners, and being flexible enough to shift the pace and approach along the way. Equity and excellence aren't mutually exclusive, either, as the leadership team from Peak to Peak Charter School[43]

in Colorado pointed out; increasing one student's equity doesn't decrease another's. The diversity of opinions on the team has helped them be more empathetic and make choices based on what's best for students. And the leadership team at Khoj Community School[35] in Mumbai, India, reminded me that this work doesn't happen in isolation—it requires a strong team that shares a common purpose.

This book is organized by strategy, as I hope it provides a handbook of sorts that readers can dig into from any starting point, depending on the challenges you're facing and the strategies you want to consider. The goal is to support leaders putting out fires, who need immediate short-term solutions, *and* to equip leaders planning for deeper challenges and long-term work. All chapters include at least one "try this" activity you can bring back to your constituents, reflective of the strategies in that chapter. And each chapter ends with suggested action steps, reflective questions, and a worksheet to help leaders and their teams dig into the ideas the chapter explores. My goal is not to provide definitive answers, since every context is different, but to provide provocations that help each school leader determine their *own* best answers.

Chapter 2 will explore the wonderful array of innovation and inclusion efforts leaders are working toward in their communities and will identify the obstacles they're encountering. Chapter 3 will dive into developing deep relationships with all constituents, so that community members trust leaders, see the *why* behind initiatives, and feel their concerns are heard and understood; this chapter will also explore how the pace of change can impact that trust. Chapter 4 explores how leaders use a combination of quantitative data, "street data" (Safir & Dugan, 2021), and other ways of knowing and defining success to help determine their community's readiness and evaluate their growth. Chapter 5 will explore how leaders leverage community voice to develop initiatives and foster buy-in, including the opinions of students, alumni, teachers, and families. Chapter 6 will look at framing and communications, at leaders who are connecting change to the purpose and history of their schools, choosing language that won't trigger community members, leaning on legal or scientific language when it helps legitimize their work, and thinking strategically about when to be proactive and when to keep their heads down. Chapter 7 looks at the importance of preparing teachers for the work we're undertaking through deep, transformative professional learning experiences that help classroom teachers shift their thinking, by rebuilding systems so teachers encounter fewer obstacles to success, and by protecting teachers so they feel safe enough to make these shifts. Finally, Chapter 8 will provide a few last thoughts from leaders, additional advice, and inspirational ideas they hope will help other leaders to thrive in this difficult work. This includes thoughts on finding partners and developing networks of support, the importance of seeing leadership as a journey and sticking to our convictions, and the power of humility, courage, and hope in the face of opposition.

My leadership coach Robin Whitacre told me once of a Buddhist leader who taught her that humans only have two core emotions, fear and love, and that the rest of our emotions spin off from them. While Brené Brown's work has catalogued a total of eighty-seven emotions within the human experience (2021), it is true that our reactions to change often come from a powerful combination of fear and love. This is particularly true for caregivers who, quite naturally, love their children deeply and fear for their well-being and success. Many leaders talked about love in our conversations, pointing out that educators love the children they work with and sharing how they work to communicate that love to parents. This book comes from the deep love I feel for the thousands of educators and learners I've encountered along my educational journey, and my enduring conviction that we can do better.

I believe that educational leaders can do this work from a place of love, confronting our fears and the resistance we face from a place of compassion for every member of our communities. Educational leaders are facing more than just challenging times; we are facing ruptures so deep that they threaten the very foundations of what we stand for as educators. It's up to us to tame the turbulence, to cultivate the climate, and to support every child in the best ways we know how. As one of my favorite poets, Carolyn Forché wrote,

> It is either the beginning or the end
> of the world, and the choice is ourselves
> or nothing. (1981, p. 59)

I have no doubt—as educators, the choice must be ourselves.

And the time is now.