Preface

It is difficult to read about education reform and school change these days and not run headlong into the idea of continuous improvement. It is ubiquitous. Continuous improvement is at once a buzzword, mantra, and a potentially effective way for schools to succeed in an uncertain and demanding future.

The call for schools and school districts to engage in continuous improvement comes from many quarters. It is seen in the pages of practitioner and scholarly publications and heard from the podiums of professional and academic conferences. It is promoted by professional education associations, consultants, and academics alike, including the Executive Committee of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the North Central Association (NCA), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

The education literature is replete with models and strategies for schools and school districts to engage in continuous improvement and with stories of those that claim to have "done it." A search of *Books-In-Print* reveals that between 1988 and mid-2008, 216 books were published on the general subject of continuous improvement. Almost one-third of those books concern continuous improvement in education. In late 2008, the ERIC Clearinghouse listed more than 580 papers and articles on continuous improvement in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education.

So why another treatment of continuous improvement? The short answer is that while there is growing attention to the subject and while there are increasing calls for schools to engage in it, there has not been a systematic effort to examine the subject in a comprehensive way. Much of what has been written about continuous improvement in education tells what a school or school district has done, makes an argument about what a school or school district should do, or presents "how-to" steps for doing it. Continuous improvement is often discussed and promoted as if the concept and the theory or logic behind it were self-evident and unproblematic. Little attention has been paid to empirical evidence of its effectiveness. Few connections have been made in the education literature to the more fully developed conceptual, theoretical, and empirical literatures outside of education. The idea of continuous improvement is not new. It has at least a century-long lineage, but its history has gone largely unexamined. We are barreling toward continuous improvement without a good sense of what it is and what it might and might not accomplish. If continuous improvement is to be pursued in schools at the pace and with the force with which it is being promoted, it is a good time to take an in-depth, analytical look at it.

PURPOSES OF THE BOOK

The purposes of this book are twofold. The first is to analyze the concept and theory of continuous improvement and to synthesize what is known about its practice and its effectiveness in schools. This means addressing several questions: What does the concept of continuous improvement mean? Where does the concept come from? What are the reasons for engaging in continuous improvement? What are the anticipated outcomes of continuous improvement in schools? What is the evidence about the effectiveness of continuous improvement? How is continuous improvement practiced in schools? What processes are used? What organizational supports are needed for these processes to be successful? What does continuous improvement look like "in action"? And finally, what are the practical implications of answers to these questions for schools as they pursue continuous improvement?

The second purpose of this book is to inform the practice of continuous improvement. This is not a conventional "how-to" book. It is not a "step-by-step" action guide for implementing continuous improvement. There are a number of these guides now available, and they can be quite useful (e.g., AdvancED, n.d.b; National Education Association, 2008; Lezotte & McKee, 2002, 2006; Zumda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004; see also Fidler, 2002; Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2001).

This book takes a different approach to informing the practice of continuous improvement. Rather than focusing on specific strategies and activities, this book considers the "best practice" of continuous improvement in terms of a set of overarching principles and "preferred states of being," here school organizational being. It argues that there are a number of specific ways that schools can effectively become continuously improving. As argued at several points in the book, what matters is that these different paths to continuous improvement are consistent with this set of principles and preferred states. This book examines these principles and preferred states in some detail and argues that the effectiveness of their enactment through specific practices depends a great deal on how school personnel define continuous improvement, how they "theorize" about it, and how they "translate" these principles and preferred states to particular contexts in real time and place.

This reasoning follows that of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1974) who stress the importance of the relationship between theory and practice. They argue that our behavior—our practice—is driven in large part by our knowledge, our assumptions, our mental frameworks, our "theories" about phenomena and relationships among them (see also Nisbett & Ross, 1980). While many factors play a role in the enactment and outcomes of our theories (Argyris & Schön, 1974), what we are able to accomplish in practice is contingent on how good our theories might be. The more well informed we are and the better our theorizing, the better our practice. In psychologist Kurt Lewin's (1935) famous words, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

HOW THE BOOK WAS DEVELOPED

This book is the result of a study of continuous improvement that began several years ago. This study started with a search of the education literature and branched out to literatures from business and management, the organizational sciences, and public administration. The search went wherever the library's reference systems led. There were dead-ends aplenty, but the result was a compilation of a substantial amount of literature, much of which has not made its way into writing in education.

While these literatures were surveyed broadly to understand the "state of the art" of past and present thinking about continuous improvement, the book itself focuses primarily on subsets of several literatures. It draws primarily on conceptual and theoretical analyses, reports of original empirical research, and analytic syntheses of original research. The characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of these literatures are discussed in several chapters.

This book draws on a great deal of material from outside of education because so much of the theory and empirical evidence about continuous improvement comes from studies of non-education organizations. And this raises a perennial issue about the applicability to schools of theory and empirical evidence developed through the study of non-educational organizations, particularly businesses and industries. One perspective posits that schools are unique organizations. Their missions and functions, their "core technologies" of teaching and learning, their work with children and youth, among other things, are so completely different that knowledge about other types of organizations is not relevant and applicable.

This book adopts a different point of view, one advanced by Seymour Sarason (1996), Kenneth Wilson and Bennett Daviss (1994), and others. This perspective, in Sarason's words, "gives up the myth that in regard to the design and redesign process schools are unique social systems" (p. 359). It holds that schools are only a different type of organization. Again, in Sarason's words:

> It seems so obvious that we overlook or fail to see the myriad similarities among organizations. Indeed, we [educators] are likely to resist a point of view that holds that organizations are different; they are not unique. And the *practical* consequences of seeing them as different but not unique are enormous. . . . (pp. 317–318)

In his historical analysis of the relationship between education and business, Larry Cuban (2004) encourages his readers not to automatically write off business-inspired efforts to improve schools even though "their purposes, authority, and outcomes differ in fundamental ways" (p. 12). Instead he urges "even-handed analysis" and "balanced judgments" (p. 14). And in introducing their analysis of "turning around" failing schools, Joseph Murphy and Coby Meyers (2007) argued the following:

> PreK–12 education can learn a good deal . . . by carefully studying work afoot in other industries and organizations. . . . Yet these insights are conspicuous by their absence from the education turnaround literature. Indeed, there is an insularity and parochialism in the turnaround literature in education that is as arrogant as it is ill advised. Our message is that there are lessons from turning around other institutions . . . that can help us more effectively undertake recovery work in failing schools. (pp. 4–5)

A message of this book is similar—there are lessons from continuous improvement in other organizations that can help us more effectively understand and undertake continuous improvement in schools.

That said, there is no intention here to privilege or deify non-education organizations. Nor is there any suggestion that any particular organizational type "has it over" schools and establishes the model for schools to follow. Instead, this analysis looks across literatures about different organizations for similarities and differences in theories and research findings. These organizations include

schools, businesses, industries, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies. The idea is that where convergence exists, we can have greater confidence in the relevance and applicability of ideas and findings to schools. As will be clearly evident throughout this book, there is a substantial amount of convergence.

One other matter concerning the development of the book is important to note. The study focused predominantly on continuous improvement at the school level. It did not explore in any systematic way continuous improvement at the school district level. The reason is twofold. First, there is virtually no literature related to continuous improvement of the central office or at the districtwide level. Second, while ideas about continuous improvement at the school level could have been applied hypothetically to the central office and to the district level, it would have required many more pages than are here. The reader is invited to consider how the ideas and findings discussed throughout the book might apply to the central office and to the district level. It is likely that many will.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is organized in seven chapters. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 focus primarily on the theory of continuous improvement and evidence of its effectiveness. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus primarily on the practice of continuous improvement. Chapter 7 takes stock and engages a number of issues related to schools becoming continuously improving organizations.

Chapter 1 is an assessment of the changing conditions of schools, the ability of schools as they are currently organized and operated to succeed in these conditions and in the future, and the attendant call for schools to engage in continuous improvement. Chapter 2 explores the meaning of continuous improvement—in the education and non-education literatures—and it presents a number of key, common definitional properties of the concept, the theory or logic of continuous improvement, and the benefits that are expected to come from it. This chapter also traces the historical roots of continuous improvement, noting several related concepts and theories of organizational change. Chapter 3 contains a review of findings from research about the effectiveness of continuous improvement in schools and in different types of non-education organizations.

Chapter 4 explores the processes of continuous improvement. It presents a basic process model and then examines the historical and contemporary application of this model in schools. It reviews several contemporary process models of continuous improvement in schools and concludes by distilling and analyzing their common properties. Chapter 5 further explores the practice in terms of organizational design elements needed to support continuous improvement processes and the implementation of particular initiatives that might be generated by them. Chapter 6 presents four vignettes of continuous improvement "in action." These vignettes feature two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. They illustrate the development of continuous improvement processes over time and various organizational design elements that are integral to their success. They reflect key aspects of continuous improvement processes discussed in Chapter 4 and organizational design elements discussed in Chapter 5. They also reflect some of the changes and uncertainties in school context discussed in Chapter 1. Additional examples of continuous improvement "in action" are found in the discussion of research in Chapter 3.

Chapter 7 provides a summary of the book and, using ideas and evidence developed in the first six chapters, engages two questions. The first question is, *Should schools pursue continuous improvement?* And the second is, *If they pursue it, how might they do so successfully?* The answer to the first question constitutes a basic argument of the book. In brief, the argument is that there is a very good reason and good enough evidence to pursue continuous improvement as a process of school improvement and as a way to organize schools. It is a potentially powerful option for preparing schools to be effective in a demanding and uncertain future. However, the pursuit should not proceed without study and reflection. A good deal is known about continuous improvement in educational and non-educational organizations, but there is much more to be learned. While this book does not lay out an agenda for research on continuous improvement in schools, it is not difficult to see where inquiry is warranted. Making inquiry a central focus is perfectly consistent with the theory of continuous improvement, for it is through continuous inquiry, among other things, that continuous improvement is achieved.

At the end of each chapter is a short series of questions for study, reflection, and action. These questions are designed primarily for practicing educators and for readers preparing to become school leaders, although all readers should find them helpful in one way or another. Posing these particular questions aims to achieve several specific objectives. One objective is to stimulate thinking about and promote deeper understanding of particular ideas and arguments presented throughout the book. A second objective is to prompt readers to "test" these ideas and arguments against their own experiences, to see how well they hold up in relation to particular school settings. A third objective is to introduce readers to several aspects of the actual work of continuous improvement. In one way or another, each series of questions evokes some important aspect of this work, be it assessing future challenges and opportunities; identifying and clarifying the mission, vision, and core values of a school; assessing and choosing different process models of continuous improvement; assessing organizational capacity for continuous improvement; identifying and assessing the quality of evidence and using evidence to make assessments and support decisions; deciding how to assess implementation and outcomes of continuous improvement; and so forth. These questions communicate important "how-to" information, and they provide some initial experiences in putting the ideas of this book to work.