

Introduction

Fueling the Passion in Our Schools

This book was born from many long discussions between the authors that concluded with the notion that if schools were filled with passionate staff members—teachers and leaders—then our students would be much better off. We often wondered during these conversations why the profession seems to be suffering from a passion deficit. As school and district leaders, we know it certainly is not because our fellow educators entered the profession without sparks of enthusiasm and the desire to change the world through the students we influence. That’s simply not the case. In fact, many educators are so incredibly passionate that their zest is palpable. There are educators who are filled with and driven by passion throughout their entire careers. They are examples to us, and they model how this work is a way of life, not just a job, a career, or even a calling. As we delved into this topic, through dinner table conversations and friendly chatter, we always came back to the teachers who truly made a difference in our lives, not only for what they knew but for how they made us feel—inspired, confident, able, with a clear sense of self, and belonging. Joe clearly recalls a time on the school playground during picture day when a teacher he didn’t know walked over, said “Hi” and commented, “I really like that shirt.” Joe was feeling a little insecure because the shirt was not what a typical 11-year-old would wear, but it was all he had. What the teacher didn’t know is that Joe’s dad had left that year, abandoning him, his older brother, older sister, and their mom who was struggling to keep things afloat. That day, ingrained in Joe’s mind forever, is inspiration that kind words and pure good will always make a difference. What’s more is that you

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never know who may need it. This is what still drives Joe, today, as an educator, like so many of us who have similar stories to tell.

What we realize, though, is that we need more passionate educators to make the great strides that we have before us. Our goal with this book is to fuel the passion for those who are still running strong but also to reignite the passion that many of us once had for serving children. We desire to motivate the educational community, and others, to strive to become the best teachers and leaders we can be. It is time for us to support and inspire leaders, with boots on the ground, who are committed to taking courageous actions for student success and well-being. This book is a call to action for teachers and leaders around the world to recommit to becoming the passionate educators that our children deserve. Furthermore, passion is important in every industry. This book can serve as a reminder for anyone in any profession.

Why are we in such a critical need for passion in schools? The answer is that the school systems designed to educate our youth don't do a good enough job nurturing educators. Our schools don't always encourage the qualities that are needed for people to be passionate and maintain that passion throughout their careers. Instead, more often than we would like, our current educational system unfortunately does the opposite. But we know it doesn't have to be that way. We've built cultures in schools where passion was the norm—in public and private schools, in elementary schools, in middle schools, in high schools, in charter schools, and in career and technical schools. We've brought the passion with us into a school, and we've watched as others have rekindled their passion for teaching and learning. Because we see such a critical need, we put together a blueprint for any school to follow, and if they follow the script to the letter, they will reignite the passion in the people who work there. Principals will need to walk through their schools with a water hose because their staffs will be on fire for children.

We hope this book will inspire you to smile and laugh about some of our current conditions but to also have hope for a brighter future. We want to spark innovation, creativity, and new ways of thinking about how we build culture in schools, and we hope you'll take immediate and powerful action with us on a new journey across

the country and around the world. For those of us in the trenches who know so well that school systems are ready for a new approach and innovative thinking, this book is our blueprint for unparalleled success in our schools. We know that you have a passion, a spark for kids and adults, or you wouldn't be reading this book, but we're going to fuel that even further through positivity. We're going to inspire you to lead others to grow faster, and we're going to show you how a collective commitment in your school will raise the roof. In fact, we are demanding that you join our revolution. We know you can make this happen in your school and district, but we also know that there are distinct challenges that you will need to overcome.

We could spend the entire book identifying and admiring the problems that exist in schools where passion is low or even non-existent—but that would do nothing more than criticize schools and educators working in them, playing the blame game. That's not the book we want to write, nor is it a book we are interested in reading, and we're sure you feel the same. There's already enough blame for everyone in our profession to have two helpings and then go back for a third. We won't do any blaming here because we believe that if you're not part of the solution, you're just adding to the problem. In fact, this book is a call to action for educators to make sure that passion is in our schools, for our students, for the teachers, and for the administrators, all doing the work that it takes to be the beacon of hope for our future. However, to understand how to increase our passion to new levels in schools, we must always be aware of the systemic issues we face before our solutions are understood. We will take a moment in this introduction to recognize three of the most crippling obstacles, which act as roadblocks and hazards when firing up the passion engines in our schools. We call them *Trip Traps* because they end up tripping you up and trapping your thinking, preventing you from moving forward. These issues are an affront to your leadership, in the classroom and beyond, and you must be courageous to move past them. Despite these obstacles and challenges we note here, many school leaders are currently making it happen, and their inspirational message and scores of achievement can be replicated. Their stories are found in this book, written for you to spur you on in your journey as an educator. And this blueprint will show you how to

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make great things happen for your school as well, but let's be sure to outline the issues we will encounter along the way.

TRIP TRAPS: COMMON TRAPS THAT TRIP UP EVEN THE BEST LEADERS

Trip Trap #1: The Education System Tends to Major in the Minor. School districts, for too long, have focused on things that teachers and school leaders know are not what gets the real work done for kids, and their voice is lost at the decision-making table, wherever that may be. Policies like No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and even the Every Student Succeeds Act put a ton of inappropriately applied pressure on schools that doesn't take into consideration what really matters most. We're not advocating for lower accountability measures, and we're not policy experts, but we do know that policies often mandate a different focus than what is needed, too often treating symptoms and not the core issues. When educators are empowered to put first things first, to create a plan that truly homes in on the priorities of a school, they stretch far beyond test scores to create systems that are successful at more than "proficiency."

Recent educational policies have turned improvement measures into pressure cookers, and the result is compliance-based thinking about how to help teachers get better and push schools to stay on track toward success. All the while, we're thumbing through handbooks to follow the rules to document our progress, and, in turn, we lose focus on what matters most. It's why we hear a lot of educators question "Is this what's best for kids?" In a system where decisions don't always get made with that in mind, it's the right thing to ask, but it means that we arrived at a time where a decision might get made that's not best for kids. Not good, and it's time to make sweeping changes to our blueprint for sustaining passion in our schools. Let's be ready to prioritize so compliance doesn't compete with making a difference for our kids.

Time spent on anything except a deep desire to grow is time wasted in schools. The system of accountability is broken when it doesn't support growth and development, and we want to bring that

sentiment back. We'll show you how to spark passion and the desire to grow faster in Part I.

The kind of inspiration that uplifts people, organizations, and communities is more than an idle wish or fancy speech; it must also instigate powerful, new, and deliberate actions. It is evident in what people do as well as what they say, and requires courage, daring, and determination to bring it to fruition. (Hargreaves, Boyle, & Harris, 2014)

Trip Trap #2: The Load Is Far Too Heavy for Only a Few to Carry Its Weight. The weight of educating young people is not getting any lighter and will likely only get heavier. The only way to lighten the load in the future is if we all contribute to carrying its weight. Too often we've heard seasoned teachers tell new teachers that "It gets easier after your first year." They say this to new teachers as a way to make them feel better after a bad day or a difficult week. But the reality is that it only gets easier when teachers grow and master their craft. In fact, we contend that this type of thinking doesn't recognize and appreciate the incredible growth teachers experience over a career. The truth is that the work never gets easier. Rather, seasoned teachers get better over time. Yes, you may develop systems and structures that free up some time or give the foundation for great lessons, but great teachers then use that time to improve other areas, become more creative, and strive to reach every child. They grow, they learn, and they develop into masters of their craft, making the work seemingly easier when it's not, and it shouldn't be.

We have to be mindful of telling ourselves that teaching should be, or will become, easier. It may seem like semantics, but this way of thinking actually assumes that the load is too much to bear: "Don't worry it will get easier." What we need to actually say that empowers teachers is, "Don't worry, you're going to get much better." Teacher retention is a major concern, and in one study by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, teachers acknowledged that they need *supportive leadership* and *time to collaborate* with their peers (Scholastic, 2011). Education is a demanding profession and it's not easy work. We have to quit praying for a lighter load and start building a stronger back. That only happens through supportive environments, collaboration,

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partnerships, and placing value on hard work. The view that teaching is an innate skill, and that good teachers were “born” to teach, erodes the technical, scientific, and skill-driven side of the profession. Education is not an early-out, summers-off, no-nights type of work that some believe it to be. Great educators strive to perfect their craft, and it is vital that this is recognized and rewarded, which has to happen strategically from the inside out.

On top of that, we tend to move people through the system without proper preparation. A good teacher becomes an assistant principal. A good assistant principal becomes a principal. A good principal becomes an assistant superintendent. A good assistant superintendent becomes a superintendent. Education promotes from within, based on prior effectiveness, moving people into positions that they may have no experience or aptitude to do. It’s no different than if a good architect becomes the CEO in a large architecture firm, finding himself working in a position that he is ill-equipped to do. There’s evidence that some of our teachers aren’t totally prepared for the classroom as they leave their preservice programs, and yet we operate in a system that promotes people based on degrees, certifications, and years of service and not always the ability to do the job. It’s possible that someone moves all the way to the highest levels within the school system without the proper support and preparation needed to fulfill the responsibilities. We need to work in a model that supports those in their current roles and develops them to meet the needs of the organization and their future aspirations. Working extremely hard, fingers-to-the-bone, is what it takes, along with a contribution from everyone.

It’s imperative that “work ethic,” with everyone contributing, is at the heart of our conversations about hiring and retaining the right people in our schools who in turn inspire our students to persevere despite the odds. We have to ensure that people are set up for success in the work environment, but we need to set the bar high enough that people realize that this profession demands a great deal of time, talent, and expertise. A few cannot carry the many. Schools require everyone within the school community to work together for the betterment of children. We need educators who are willing to take control of the steering wheel, leaders who are not

comfortable just being passengers. We need the willing and the brave to take the wheel and drive forward, pushing our organizations toward excellence at all costs. Our schools, our students, cannot afford to carry passengers among us, simply along for the ride. We can't continue to enable riders, and we need to value our drivers—those willing to take command amid uncertainty and fear. One way to value these drivers is to recognize their hard work and willingness to push forward despite the conditions. Our value for the driver will make the passengers more uncomfortable, and in a culture committed to success, the passenger's seat will get smaller and smaller in the future. This is not a call for more leaders and fewer followers; on the contrary, this is about stronger leaders and faithful followers. Too often, the passengers don't even wonder or concern themselves with the issues and traps that prevent success and progress in our schools. For this, they cannot be permitted to remain idle and at ease. In this section, you'll need to question which seat you're in and possibly make a choice and a change. If you have a desire to improve your school's passion, we have a plan for you in Part II.

Trip Trap #3: We Need to Do a Better Job of Supporting the Profession From Within. There are some schools getting it right, supporting from within, and we need to learn to replicate that across the system. To do so, there are a few overarching issues that we need to overcome that are preventing this from happening at scale. These issues are pervasive within the system itself and center on a lack of support from inside our schools and districts. Have you ever had a *cul de sac* conversation with a teacher or an assistant principal and the immediate focal point was the most basic and worst of all situations from their day? It's normal. We justify it as venting, but, it's too bad, too often, and too detrimental that our method for dealing with the stress is our need to share the stories from our work day that highlight our lowest moments. These stories create a false perception of the reality in our schools and depict only the negative narrative from within them.

There are the inevitable minute-by-minute challenges in schools, but among 101 of our stories from any given day, there are

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100 positive, but our *need* to revert to the single negative story accentuates the negative. This is precisely part of the trap. It overshadows the good and crushes positive thinking about our own work environment and schools in general, and that comes from those within the system. The good news is that it's reversible. We can flip this need to focus on the negative with a desire to share the positive and create a culture of celebration. One incredible educator who we've had the privilege of working with, Glenn Veit of Meredith Middle School, is famous for replying to those who ask about his day, by saying, "Overall, I had a great day. In fact, I've never really had a bad day, bad moments, but not an entire day." Glenn is notoriously positive, and when asked how he is doing, he replies "I'm always good." When pressed about being "always good," he says, "sure, there are things that aren't good, but overall, I'm good." It's this kind of outlook that's necessary to paint the appropriate picture of the real sentiment from within our schools.

Not only do we tend to highlight the negative from within, we also tend to feel like many situations are out of our control, so we cast blame or throw our hands up in the air and accept the distorted notion that we can't do anything about it. We know of passionate educators, though, who pursue their vision without falter and face these issues head on by building a network of support within and beyond the walls of the school. For example, teacher quality and teacher shortages are a common problem schools face. We've all heard it before: "There aren't enough quality educators out there." But passionate leaders committed to building great schools know how to attract people and take advantage of every opportunity to hire and retain incredible educators. They do anything from developing in-house teacher preparation programs to working with surrounding universities to building relationships with local chambers of commerce to petitioning local legislators for pipelines of possibilities. Great schools make this a community issue and not just a school issue. They don't just believe in shaking their heads at the problem, but rather shaking hands with people who can help solve them. The difference is that passionate educators don't just admire problems, which only leads to apathy and procrastination, they pursue answers

and solutions with vigor and resolve. With so many pressures from the outside, we have to be our own advocates and sources of strength for the sake of ourselves, our teachers, and our students. We need to provide a positive charge for every single school in the United States and around the world.

Finally, we need kids not only to understand the power of learning, but to see their teachers and administrators as role models and great ambassadors of the profession. Students need to view the profession as something fun and inspiring to do when they grow up. When we lack this view of ourselves, we deplete our own worth and value in our roles, and it doesn't demonstrate to kids that teaching is a noble profession and unbelievably thrilling and enjoyable work. Teaching kids a new concept, fostering ideas about themselves and the world is so exciting that we want the joy and power of teaching and learning to come through these pages and shake you as the reader. We want this passion and understanding of the uniqueness and power of the profession to be the mantra of what we demonstrate to kids on a daily basis. We owe it to ourselves and to the future of teaching and learning in America and around the world.

OUR MANTRAS

This book is set up as a recipe, identifying the right ingredients for tackling tough problems in schools so that you can reignite the winning passion that the best schools in our nation exude from the inside out. This book does not simply tout heralded best practices or suggest strategic planning, it features real people with real stories about how it's being done in schools today. This work encompasses the attitudes needed among everyone and the culture that must exist in order for best practices and strategic plans to be effective.

We have three mantras that we abide by to inspire passion in ourselves. They are easy to use and powerful when followed consistently over and over again. Figure I.1 shows how all three mantras work together to encompass one cohesive model of action.

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1. *Today* I will grow by challenging myself to be the best I can.
2. *Today* I will work harder than yesterday because there isn't anything more important than now.
3. *Today* I will lift people through positivity.

Figure I.1 The Passionate Leader Model of Action



We believe that if every educator says these three phrases at the start of every day, at the start of every class period, at the start of every meeting, and whenever they are about to encounter something new or difficult, the profession will be fueled with passion. The mantras spell out a recipe for success that any school can use to inspire people to be passionate.