

Preface

This book is about courage, brains, heart, and home—four assets that are essential to carrying out the business of education. In this opening sentence, we mention these four assets and introduce one phrase—the business of education. In the chapters that follow, we will discuss how these four assets are each important to successfully educate the children and youth of our nation’s public schools. And, we will argue that educational leaders must become adept at employing business practices and procedures in this endeavor.

Rightfully, there is a growing concern that public education in America may not be up to the challenge of preparing our children and youth for the economic competition that will develop among nations in the twenty-first century. To their credit, the American news media are doing their part by shining a light on this issue. Further, the American public is becoming increasingly aware of the issue, and there is a developing clamor for higher standards and greater accountability in public education. We maintain that this accountability requires educational leaders across the nation to look in the mirror and view their images differently so as to better inform and engage the public in the intricate business of schooling. The quality of life and the economic vitality of our neighborhoods, our communities, and our nation are tethered to the academic performance of students in our schools. We must get better at the business of education.

Toward this end, we worked side by side for thirteen years in the Wake County Public School System. During this period, the school district made significant gains on a variety of student outcome indicators and received numerous national accolades. In 2004, Bill was named National Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators, and the district was recognized by *Forbes* magazine as the third best educational system among the biggest cities.

Our paths first crossed in 1994, when Tom was appointed to the Wake County Commissioner Task Force on Spending to be in charge of the education subcommittee (the largest section of the county’s budget). Tom approached this experience with a good measure of an accountant’s skepticism and Bill was his

x • A School District's Journey to Excellence

main contact with the school system. At the end of several months and hundreds of hours of studying the books, Tom emerged as a supporter of how the school system was spending citizens' tax dollars. Bill's open-book approach to information was a key factor in their ability to work together.

In 1994, Bill and Tom with many others organized the Business Education Leadership Council, which has become the main way business people in Wake County help teachers and students improve the educational process—a vehicle for businesses to support the school system without asking for money from them. Tom recently retired from this organization, now consisting of hundreds of businesses, and its unique way of operating will be explained in the book. The two joined forces again in 1995 when Bill, then associate superintendent, recognized the critical need for business collaboration to achieve success in implementing a federal School-to-Work Program. Bill called on Tom and other business leaders to not only participate, but also to lead the process. In 1998, Tom was named Wake County's Friend of Education for his work in strengthening school and business relationships. Tom also served a four-year term on the Wake County Board of Education (1999–2003). Selecting a new superintendent came up in the first six months of that term and the board chose Bill.

In this book, we describe the successes and challenges the school district has had in the past decade. During this period, the school district gained national recognition for the quality of its educational program. What is especially notable about this success is that it has been achieved in a countywide district that covers 864 square miles, has grown by 3,000 to 7,500 new students every year since the mid-1980s, has approximately 14 percent of children with special needs, is seeing dramatic growth in its population of students with limited English speaking skills, and spends less per student than most similarly-sized school systems. How has the district achieved impressive, jaw-dropping success in the face of the many challenges brought on by unrelenting enrollment growth and a period in our nation's history when public education is struggling? This book is written to address this question, and we will share our knowledge of the ways and means by which the school district is making continuous improvement to this already impressive measure of success.

The book is also written to allow other systems, large and small, to borrow from what we have done to achieve similar success. At the end of each chapter, we have provided a bulleted list of things you might do to improve operations in your district and schools. Certainly, you are already doing many of these things, and there are many other ways of bringing about improvements. Still, hopefully, a couple of our ideas will be new for you, or present a different perspective on a problem you are dealing with.

Finally, the book is written to describe how business practices and procedures can be applied in an educational environment to produce

significant and sustainable gains. For too long, educators and business leaders have kept each other at arm's length. In times past, when business leaders have expressed their desire to help advance public education, education leaders have often sought to translate this expression into donations of money and products. But we need to rethink this position, because what we lose if we only seek money are the great practices and procedures that have helped make American businesses successful. These same practices and procedures could be adapted and adopted in public education.

When education leaders in the Wake County Public School System started listening to business leaders and employing business practices and procedures, significant positive changes resulted: test scores went up greatly, teacher satisfaction and retention improved, and community support for the schools reached new levels of satisfaction and pride. The following indicators represent selected statistics of interest to the public and provide examples of some of the most notable successes the school district achieved over ten school years.

<i>Wake County Public School System</i> ¹	1993–94	2002–03
Total student population.....	76,731	108,970
Free and reduced-price lunch students.....	17,679	26,526
Special education students.....	9,430	16,418
English as second language students.....	no records	5,179
Number of teachers.....	4,650	7,254
Number of schools.....	93	127
Tax dollars spent per student on operations.....	\$4,470	\$6,613
Average SAT score.....	1030	1067
Percent of high school students taking SAT.....	75	80
Advanced Placement scores (% scoring a 3 or higher).....	77.8	78.6
Percent of students in Grades 3–8 at or above grade level on state End-of-Grade tests.....	75.7	91.3
Percent of high school students at or above grade level on state End-of-Course tests.....	73.5	83.2
Percent of students above grade level (Level IV).....	47.4	60.4
Dropout rate (Grades 7–12).....	4.3	1.8
Achievement gap (percentage points).....	37.8	18.3

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

We have organized our book around four central themes from L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, focusing on the assets of courage, brains, heart, and home. Who does not know of the Cowardly

xii • A School District's Journey to Excellence

Lion's search for courage, the Scarecrow's wish for a brain, the Tin Woodman's desire for a heart, and Dorothy's yearning to return home? In his six years as superintendent of the Wake County Public School System, Bill emphasized these assets in his interactions with thousands of teachers, parents, and community leaders. In many of his presentations, he delivered his message wrapped in these attributes. Bill maintains these assets are especially applicable to the business of education, and he knows they resonate with the public. Further, when speaking before groups, Bill knows how important it is to leave listeners with something to take with them when they exit. In this book, we develop our message regarding courage, brains, heart, and home; show how they relate to the business of education; and leave you with a challenge to put these assets into practice. When appropriately applied, these four assets are the keys to success for a classroom, school, or school district, and students will succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Courage is the willingness to do the right thing even though it may be more popular or politically expedient to do otherwise. In public education, courage is putting children first. It is about doing things differently than they have been done before—putting your career on the line by your commitment. And doing the right thing not because a researcher thinks it should work better, but because it is the right thing to do for children. Our section in Chapter 2, "Communicating With Your Public," describes a challenging time when school district leaders needed to demonstrate considerable courage while conducting an investigation into a case of fraud.

Brains demonstrate the capacity to continuously improve, resulting in life-long learning. By brains, we do not mean the work of the brain in learning; rather, we mean administrators using their brains to lock in continuous improvement as an expectation and measure of success. In this chapter of the book (Chapter 3), we emphasize the central role of planning and data analyses. The section on "Goal Setting and Planning" addresses something every school district does, and explains how the Wake County Public School System has approached setting goals for the district. Setting "Goal 2003" in the district changed our system forever and led to changes in the thinking of our employees and community. The section "Dollars and Sense" is about taking big dollar amounts and making common sense of spending practices. Explaining an \$800 million budget to a skeptical audience in thirty minutes or saving dollars by taking a different approach to control escalating insurance costs are business practices that school systems can use. We have had to exercise our brains in new and novel ways with establishing educational goals and developing budgets for the school district.

Heart demonstrates the emotion of caring for others: students, parents, and staff. This chapter (Chapter 4) is about wanting the best for everyone and not accepting the usual answer of “There is not enough money.” The section titled “Students Matter Most” is not an essay on the intricacies of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. We don’t need federal legislation to close the achievement gap. We know that we can close the achievement gap and accelerate all students; it takes heart to dedicate oneself to the effort. The section “Teachers Matter Most” is not a lobbying effort by the National Association of Educators for more pay. Teachers need incentives to improve their skills just like business workers, and knowing that somebody cares about their welfare makes their jobs better. It takes heart to care for every child, every parent, and every staff member.

Home is a place we all love and where we are loved unconditionally. It’s a place where there is a feeling that one is nurtured and cared for by those who are in charge. That’s what home should be for everyone, and in the absence of that for some, our schools must fill the void. When a student, teacher, or parent walks into a school building, he or she should feel just as comfortable and loved as in their own home. This can only come through major change in the way schools interact with their communities. In this last chapter of the book, we seek to “bring it all home” through indicating how courage, brains, and heart are essentially different aspects of the same value system, and it is this value system that undergirds the leader’s ability to create a home-away-from-home at school for every child.

What is interesting about courage, brains, and heart and their relevance to public education—just as with the Oz lead characters—is that the characters in public education (students, parents, staff, and administrators) are also searching for something they already have. Every school system has the assets of which we write; these assets only need to be encouraged and supported. Wake County has been able to recognize these assets and nurture them to make a big difference in the lives of many. We have done this with the help of many wizards—ordinary people who make extraordinary things happen like in the classic tale of Oz.

There can be no doubt in your mind that we have a passion for improving public education. Further, we both believe that modern business concepts have made a huge difference in the education offered to students in Wake County, North Carolina. And, we are certain that other districts can make use of the same practices. Our hope is that this book helps you to further develop your courage, brains, heart, and sense of home for the purpose of contributing to educational improvement throughout the country.

Lastly, a few comments on our writing style are in order. Generally, we write in the third person, using terms such as “school district leaders,” the

xiv • A School District's Journey to Excellence

“parents,” or “the individual hired for this position.” Most of what we have to say in this book is about others in our school district who have contributed to making the district as great as it is. Occasionally, we write about each other. Bill (McNeal) will write about something Tom said or did, and Tom (Oxholm) will write about something Bill did or said. And, there are even a few occasions when we will write in the first person, such as “When I saw that . . .” From the context, it will be evident who the “I” is referring to—either Bill or Tom.

We will take the credit and blame for what we say here; however, most of the story is about the many, many great board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and community partners who are all pulling together to provide every student with the highest quality educational experience possible.

We hope you enjoy our story. While *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is ultimately an allegory, this story is a true telling. Please join us as we describe for you our journey along the yellow brick road.

NOTE

1. Data have been organized from various Wake County Public School System sources and documents. Please visit the school district's Web site at www.wcpss.net.