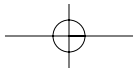
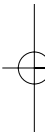
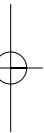


CHAPTER ONE: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS





CHAPTER ONE: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

What does our current level of organizational competence tell us about promising areas for growth?

BIG IDEA — SUCCESS IS INTENTIONAL.

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.

— Calvin Coolidge

MINDSHIFT: *Schoolwide factors shape and condition individual classroom success.*

This book is about empowering people to constantly reframe the essential elements of their school for the better. It provides two powerful forces for doing this kind of work: one is **conceptual** and the other is **methodological**. In this chapter, we introduce these two forces as essential guides to action, and we use them throughout the book. As you learn to use these forces to create adaptive strategies for coming together in positive ways, you will move closer to creating a place of learning that is self-reliant and sustainable, a place of learning that you helped shape.

If we have learned anything from the major school reform initiatives of the last decade it is this: Schools improve from the inside out. What this means is that change efforts must be personalized to fit the context of the individual school if they are to have a chance to take root. Successful schools know this lesson. They come together all the time to identify what's good about the school and celebrate it. As part of this celebration, they make plans to alter those parts of the school that keep them from achieving their goals. Because successful schools are ever vigilant to “look round” and pay attention to what they are really like inside, they are better prepared to improve what they do.

LEARNING PLACES

In this Field Guide we invite you to look at your school in new ways. Provided here are templates and strategies that focus attention upon how your school is organized for learning. Used appropriately, these templates and strategies get right to the heart of the change process: deciding and acting together.

A successful school improves because it is always learning. It is a Learning Place. *Learning Places*, because they are full of interesting and challenging opportunities to enrich our understanding of the world, like the world, are also places that are fluid. In *Learning Places* success is, by design, more prevalent than failure. Teachers and students are validated and affirmed every day for the quality of their work and neither are afraid to make mistakes. All people in the school community share in success.

A thousand good intentions are no match for a positive act.

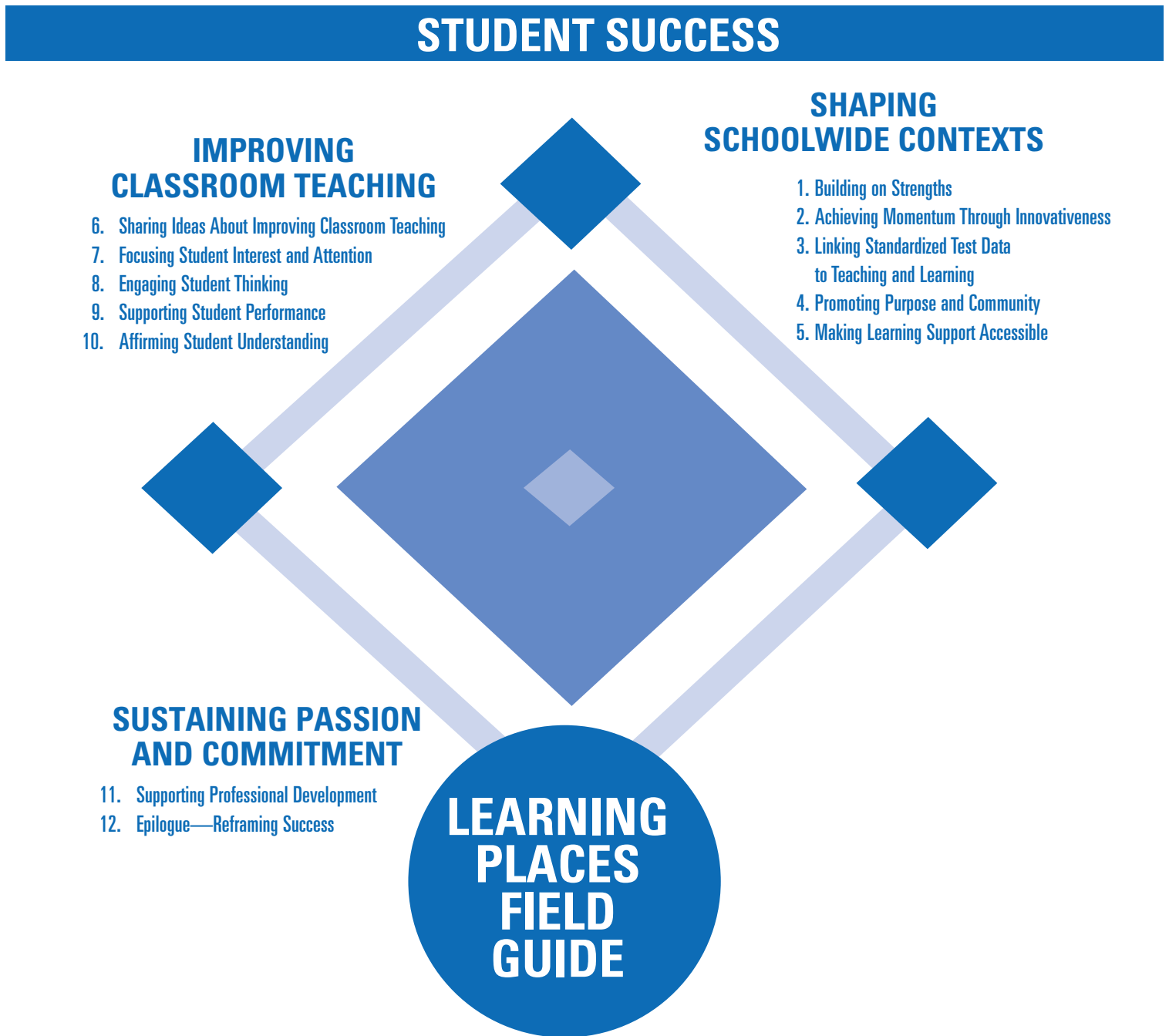
— Allen Wheelis

The problem is that most schools are not the learning places we just described. But they could be! In this Field Guide we will provide the conceptual and practical tools that you need to make your school come alive.

This Field Guide provides tools and activities that lead the reader through several phases of dialogue, self-assessment, collaborative decision making, and experimentation with what matters most in terms of becoming a learning place. In a combination of activities involving inquiry and action, this Field Guide seeks to make this journey both purposeful and professionally gratifying.

Figure 1 displays the conceptual mind-set that will be required. It involves focusing on three themes and their synergistic interrelatedness. Essentially moving to new and better schools involves Shaping Schoolwide Contexts, Radically Improving Classroom Teaching, and Sustaining Passion and Commitment. The 12 chapters indicated in Figure 1 pursue in depth these three crucial components of success.

Figure 1



Concepts and tools are flip sides of the same Learning Places coin. Concepts without tools are great ideas with no means of getting anywhere. Tools without ideas are mindless. Together they bring out the best in each other. Good tools force greater clarity of thinking; good ideas sharpen the precision of tools, and more than that, they indicate the conditions under which the tool should and should not be used.

LEARNING PLACES

Become the lesson you would teach; be what you would have others become.

—Adapted from Gandhi

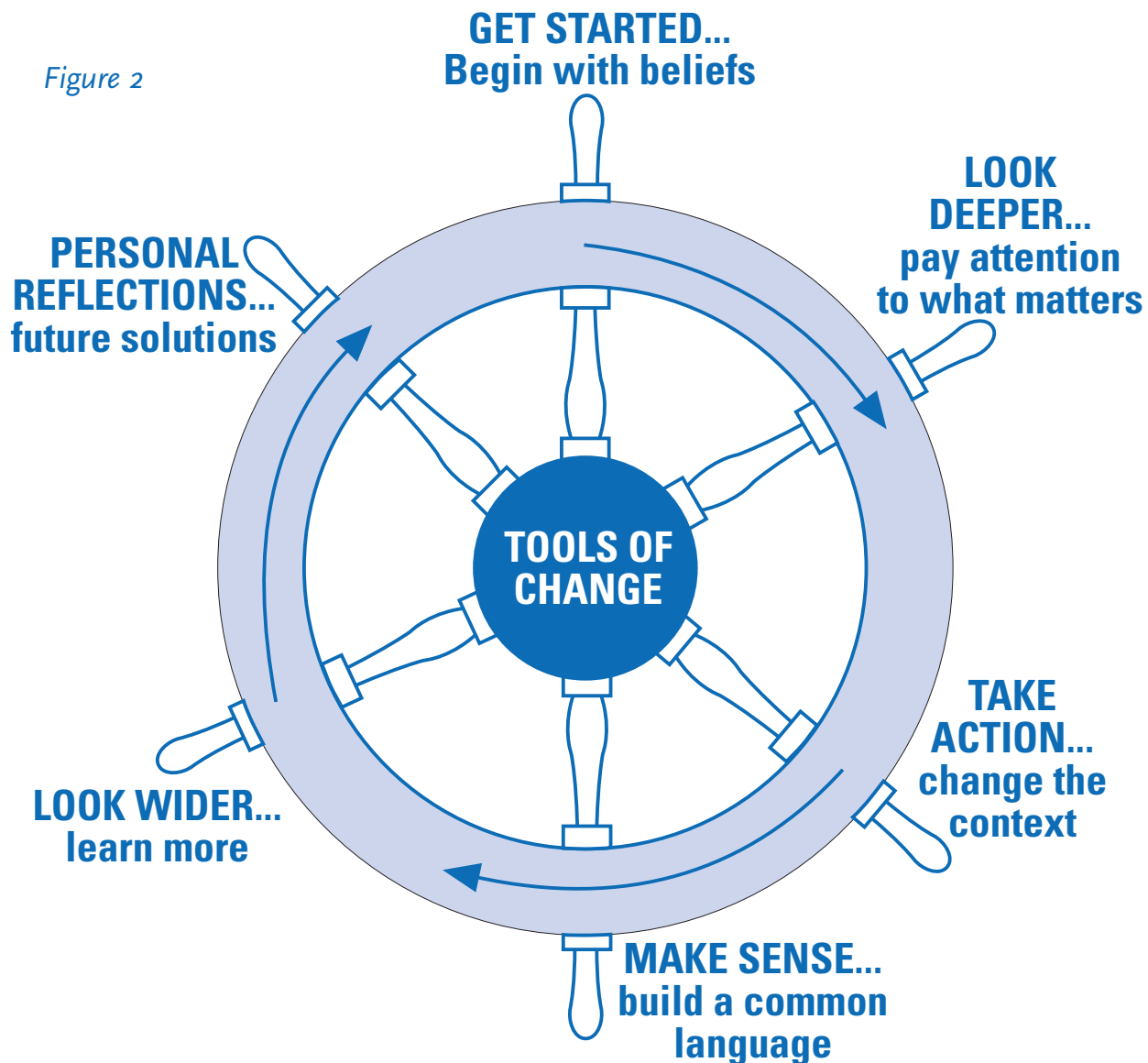
TOOLS OF CHANGE

The components of this Field Guide are designed to move the reader through a series of linked activities that progress from discussion to observation, to action planning and beyond.

Concepts, even powerful ones like those in Figure 1, do not develop on their own. For this journey, you will also need critical methods for moving to new destinations. We call these Tools of Change (see Figure 2).

Using these tools, each chapter mediates a specific inquiry about the subtle and not-so-subtle attributes of schools that significantly impact student learning and provide wonderful, challenging, and fulfilling work opportunities for teachers and principals.

Figure 2



CHAPTER ONE: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

GETTING STARTED is made actionable in this Field Guide using a **READ REACT SHARE** learning strategy. Readers are encouraged to preview the questions, make personal notes, discuss these notes with colleagues, and then form collective judgments that “jump-start” purposeful action. These judgments are the nuts and bolts of shared purpose. This dialogue is intended to “set the stage” for meaningful inquiry, which is the next step in the improvement process.

In schools where the challenges are formidable (and those where they are not), there is a temptation to skip the Getting Started phase of school reform. The familiar “been there; done that” is the killer phrase of choice for opinion leaders who do not understand the importance of constantly shaping the conditions that surround them.

LOOKING DEEPER is a Field Guide activity designed to draw the reader ever closer to specific examples of the school’s present state of operation. Looking Deeper connects observations to future action. The Looking Deeper template is usually presented in checklist format for use as an observation tool. Looking Deeper gives more specificity to what is happening or what is not happening in the school. Looking Deeper always generates positive energy because it gives people an opportunity to validate existing accomplishments.

TAKING ACTION is a suggested group activity designed to lead faculty members and interested volunteers to their own informed judgments about an appropriate course of action. Each Taking Action activity will involve some form of job-embedded experimentation coupled with a decision-making process. Taking Action makes public our commitment to change the context of the school for the better.

REVISITING WHAT WE STAND FOR
AND QUESTIONING THE FIT BETWEEN
WHAT WE BELIEVE AND WHAT WE
DO IS FUNDAMENTAL TO ANY
IMPROVEMENT PROCESS.

LEARNING PLACES

MAKING SENSE is a glossary of ideas and strategies presented in each chapter. It is designed to give further specificity to ideas and options for changing the conditions of learning present in the school. Readers are encouraged to use the Making Sense component of the Field Guide to build a common language for sharing ideas with others in grade-level meetings, study groups, and faculty planning sessions. Ideally, interested faculty members lead discussions about how a particular strategy or idea might further efforts to improve the school.

LOOKING WIDER is an invitation to learn from recently published books and resources that pertain to each chapter's topic. Intended for use in faculty retreats, study groups, and action research projects that take self-study to the next level of complexity, the references listed here contain substantive information for readers wishing to investigate promising research related to each chapter's topic.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS is a journaling activity that helps the reader formulate insights into what has been learned and how it can be used to foster continued improvements in the future. Each chapter closes with an opportunity for writing. By writing our personal views about each topic, we create an important bridge between knowing and future action. Readers are asked to write their journal notes in the form of personal experience. The template for journal notes will guide this process.

Each of the aforementioned components can be used independently to form a reasoned basis for appropriate action. Each is intended to lead the reader to personal ideas about how the school might be improved. They are also designed to prompt collaborative dialogue, optimism, and creative problem solving. Shared in an honest attempt to find a better way to orchestrate the many interconnected routines and traditions of a school, these components help practitioners direct their attention and guarantee that they are touching all of the bases.

Used as a system of inquiry, with each connected to the other, the tools of change described here place a particular school with its specific differences at the center of inquiry. In a real sense, because time is always problematic when it comes to school reform, a field guide is only as good as its power to focus attention on the most relevant, actionable information.

CHAPTER ONE: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

It is time to establish the new contexts we need. The ideas and practices we suggest are within the grasp of all of us. We don't need to wait for someone else to improve our lot. It won't happen. The paradox of large-scale fundamental change is that it must be created by individuals and small groups who accomplish real change on the ground. It is time then to change the journey. And you, the reader, can use this Field Guide to create your own dynamic Learning Place.

The central theme of this field guide is that schools and school systems develop best when the people in them are willing to question how they embed learning into all aspects of the school's daily routines. By becoming more aware of a school's habitual ways of organizing for learning and questioning if these habits serve their purposes, schools set into motion a cascade of events that build social cohesion and set the stage for future growth and development.

SEVERAL OPTIONS FOR USING THIS FIELD GUIDE TO STRUCTURE AND ENRICH AN INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL'S SELF-STUDY ARE AS FOLLOWS:

OPTION ONE

Use this book as a guide for a schoolwide faculty study project. Interested faculty members can form study groups to (1) survey the contents of the guide, (2) select one of the three major themes of inquiry, (3) work together to complete suggested activities, and (4) share their recommendations for improving specific elements of the school, its contexts, for the better.

OPTION TWO

Designate a team of interested faculty members or administrators to join teams from "sister schools" to meet regularly to share ideas and "field-tested" strategies for improvement. Assign a section of the Field Guide for completion and then have teams meet to share insights and promising options for shaping the context of schooling for the better.

OPTION THREE

Assign a departmental chairperson in secondary schools and a grade-level chairperson in elementary schools to meet regularly with members of the department using the Field Guide activities to generate dialogue and suggested improvements for their department or grade-level group.

OPTION FOUR

Be creative and design your own "best use" for the Field Guide.

Any place that anyone can learn something useful from someone with experience is an educational institution.

—Al Capp

LEARNING PLACES

GETTING STARTED

The following **read-react-share** activity is designed to generate a “fast facts” profile of your school’s existing level of operational competence.

It highlights faculty perceptions of the school’s strengths and shortcomings.

Directions:

1. *Convene a study group or committee interested in using the Field Guide to generate new ways of seeing, talking about, and solving your school’s problems.*
2. *Begin the process by completing the survey charts on the following pages.*
3. *Discuss and summarize committee responses.*
4. *Use these responses to select specific chapters in the Field Guide that are particularly relevant to your school’s needs. (See Essential Questions for further clarification.)*
5. *Have fun improving your school and learning together.*

Each chapter of the Field Guide will lead the reader through several phases of inquiry and decision making as follows:

- Reflecting upon and shaping beliefs about the existing conditions of the school program (Getting Started)
- Verifying beliefs in action using observation data (Looking Deeper)
- Selecting promising options and involving other faculty members in implementation projects (Taking Action)
- Further clarifying issues (Making Sense)
- Expanding inquiry to the literature (Looking Wider)
- Capturing reflections and representing outcomes (Personal Reflections)

NOTE WELL:

Before getting started, let us highlight one crucial fact. *Learning Places* is about “learning in context.” It is about job-embedded learning where workshops, courses, and policies are only external inputs. Such inputs do not matter unless they are coupled with day-to-day learning in school and district cultures. Judith Little put it best in her early studies of collegiality: imagine that you would become a better teacher, just by virtue of the fact that you were on the staff of a particular school (or imagine the opposite).

CHAPTER ONE: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

List everything you would tell a prospective parent or student about your school's unique features: its programs, learning-centered routines, achievements, and campus.

What would you say to a colleague about aspects of the school that would warrant attention?

STRENGTHS	CONCERNS
UNIQUE PROGRAMS:	
LEARNING-CENTERED ROUTINES:	
ACHIEVEMENTS:	
CAMPUS FEATURES:	

SECTION A SHAPING SCHOOLWIDE CONTEXTS: CHAPTERS 2, 3, 4, 5

LEARNING PLACES

List everything you would say to a visiting teacher about effective teaching practices they might observe in classrooms.

What would you say to a colleague about your concerns about the quality of teaching innovations in your school?

STRENGTHS

CONCERNS

Effective Teaching Practices:

SECTION B

MINDFUL TEACHING: CHAPTERS 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

CHAPTER ONE: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

List everything you would say to a business partner or distant administrator about projects and faculty development initiatives that have had positive effects upon student learning.

What would you tell a colleague about recent Professional Development initiatives aimed at improving teaching capacity and innovativeness among faculty members?

PROMISING STRATEGIES

CONCERNS

Professional Development Initiatives:

Sustaining Passion and Commitment:

BASED UPON THIS INFORMAL SURVEY DATA, LIST SEVERAL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES THAT MERIT CONSIDERATION:

-
-
-
-

SECTION C SUSTAINING PASSION AND COMMITMENT: CHAPTERS 11, 12

LEARNING PLACES

CREATING A LEARNING PLACE

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS:

Jot down your main learnings from Chapter 1

