How Schools Around the World Are
Inspiring Greatness, One Child at a Time

2nd Edition

The Leader in Me

New York Times Bestselling Authors

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Chapter 1

1

Too Good to Be True?

> When I first started telling people about this leadership
> model, there were several naysayers who thought it all a
> bunch of "fluff." But now they are believers.
>
> —*Leslie Reilly, Seminole County Public Schools, Florida*

When the first edition of *The Leader in Me* was published toward the end of 2008, it began with the story of Drs. Rig and Sejjal Patel. They had just moved their family to Raleigh, North Carolina, and begun the task of looking for a school where their children could learn in a safe and mind-stimulating environment. As they talked to neighbors and colleagues, the name of one school kept popping up: A.B. Combs Elementary.

On paper, A.B. Combs was quite ordinary. It was a public school in a suburban neighborhood. There were nearly nine hundred students, of whom 18 percent spoke English as a second language, 40 percent qualified for free or reduced lunches, and 21 percent were placed in special programs. The building that housed them was fifty years old. Some teachers had been there for years.

But while on paper A.B. Combs appeared nothing too unusual, the stories the Patels kept hearing exceeded their loftiest expectations. They heard about confident and respectful students, an engaged staff, strong test scores, and a "Principal of the Year." Discipline problems were minimal, and students who had struggled at other schools were

progressing well at this one. It all sounded pretty good. In fact, to the Patels, it sounded a bit "too good to be true."

The Patels decided to see the school firsthand. What they discovered was that just entering the front doors was an engaging experience. There was a feeling not felt in many schools. The walls were cheery and even motivational. Diversity was celebrated. They found that all students and staff learned *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* the same leadership principles that top leaders around the world have been trained in for years. They observed that all students were assigned leadership roles, and that many decisions were made by students, not teachers. They saw students setting academic and personal goals and tracking progress in personalized notebooks. All this they found remarkable, enough so that they left the visit sensing that what they had been hearing about A.B. Combs was true after all.

The Patels ended up enrolling their children. Those children have now graduated and moved on, having had a memorable experience. Many other parents have since visited A.B. Combs to see for themselves if the school is too good to be true. Most are not only pleased

A.B. Combs Elementary is a public school located in Raleigh, North Carolina.

with what they see, they are delighted to discover that more than two thousand schools have now embarked on the same process, spanning over thirty countries.

What About for You?

The reason why the Patels, others, and perhaps even you have questioned the reports about A.B. Combs as being too good to be true is that they are in such stark contrast to what we have become accustomed to hearing in recent years. We are so inundated with stories of bullying, rude manners, low test scores, disrespect, lack of discipline, violence, poor graduation rates, mediocre teachers, and so forth, that many people are fully skeptical that anything so positive can come from schools. Either they find it too hard to believe, or they question its sustainability.

Such skepticism has value. It cautions us against latching on to every flashy fad or flimsy program that comes along, only to see it fade with no lasting impact. Yet while skepticism has its benefits, it is a sour source to draw upon for vision and passion. Skepticism is a critic, not a model. Skepticism does not think out of the box; it shrinks the box. Skepticism designs weak school-improvement strategies and anemic lesson plans. That is why skepticism and its peers—pessimism, cynicism, apathy, and despair—should never be hired to run a school, a classroom, a counseling office, a library, or a playground.

A far better source of inspiration for making decisions and leading in a school is hope. Hope informs us of better ways of doing things. Hope keeps students and staff members progressing. Hope shines light beyond the darkness of school tragedies. Hope sees potential in people—all people.

What the Patels and now many more parents are witnessing at A.B. Combs and these schools is hope. They see hope in the form of teachers engaged in their work. They see hope in the form of students learning skills that will help them throughout life. They see hope in the form of involved and satisfied parents. All this is bringing a new

level of hope to the field of education under the banner of *The Leader in Me*.

As you come to the conclusion of this book, we hope you will have enough insight into *The Leader in Me* to determine whether or not you feel it is too good to be true.

Matching Today's Realities

A comment we hear regularly is that what the schools highlighted in this book are doing is "perfectly matched to today's realities." Let us explain.

Not that long ago, we lived in the information age. In that age, the individuals with the most "facts" in their heads scored highest on fact-based exams, which got them into the best fact-based universities, which accelerated their climb up the best fact-based career ladders. In those days, about all schools needed to worry about was inserting as many academic facts into students' brain cells as possible.

Well, that era is over. It has given way to the age of the knowledge worker. What happened is that the same facts that we formerly tried to cram into students' heads, and were once available only from top experts and top universities, are now accessible to most every nook on the planet. Whether sitting on a plane, waiting for a bus, working at a desk, or living in a thatched hut, people can now access more facts in a matter of seconds from pocket-sized devices than they could from spending an entire month in a university library only a short time ago. As a result, many of the elite jobs that previously required extensive factual knowledge are being handed off to computers or individuals with far fewer credentials. Factual knowledge alone, therefore, is no longer the great differentiator between those who succeed in the new reality and those who do not.

So if factual knowledge is no longer king, what then is the great differentiator between those who succeed in the new reality and those who do not? According to Daniel Pink and others, those who are succeeding are those who possess above-average creativity, strong

problem-solving skills, and a knack for foresight. They are the inventors, designers, big-picture thinkers, meaning makers, and pattern recognizers. They are those who know how to analyze, optimize, synthesize, present, and do worthwhile things with facts. That is why they are called knowledge workers.

But there is more.

With the shift to the age of the knowledge worker has come simultaneous shifts in societal norms. Among them is the reality that more and more students are heading home after school to sit behind locked doors and play video games by themselves until mom or dad arrives home at night. Many of the games entail seek-to-destroy activities with no need to communicate or work out amenable solutions with

others, and no real consequences. Other students are opting to get together with friends after school digitally rather than meeting face-to-face. One school we work with reports that 90 percent of its students come from single-mother homes, with most of those students having never met their fathers. Another is in a drug-infested area and its exterior walls are pocked with bullet holes.

> **The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind—computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands.**
> —*Daniel Pink,* A Whole New Mind

Meanwhile, advances in technology and transportation have turned the world into a global playing field and more students are thinking in terms of being global citizens. Others feel they are entitled to certain privileges. And the list of societal shifts goes on, many of which are causing adults to wonder how today's students will ever learn to communicate properly, to resolve conflicts in a civil fashion, to work with people of diverse backgrounds, or to effectively lead their lives in a competitive world that is in commotion.

So yes, we know it is an old line but "Times have changed." In fact, they have changed so much that the age of the knowledge worker is no longer sufficient to describe our age. That is why Daniel Pink has observed that, in addition to possessing the traits of knowledge workers,

the people who are truly thriving in today's reality are those who are also good listeners and team builders. They are able to "understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one's self and to elicit it in others." They may not know all the facts themselves but do know how to bring the right people together to assemble the facts and derive solutions. They are those who have empathy skills and can leverage people's opinions and talents. In other words, they not only have the ability to work with knowledge, they also have—surprise, surprise!—good people skills.

Pink is by no means singing solo. As we will see in Chapter 2, other experts have been signaling the same new reality for some time. They are not referring to a futuristic world, they are speaking of now! What they are calling for is for educators to take a hard, fresh look at how they approach three rapidly evolving challenges in the new reality:

Academics. In today's world, students must learn how to not just memorize and regurgitate academic facts but also apply them to authentic situations. They must have stronger analytical, critical-thinking, problem-solving, and creativity skills to succeed in the years ahead. For this to happen, educators must reexamine and adjust their teaching styles and curriculums to accommodate this way of learning and applying.

School culture. What school in today's reality is not scrambling to deal with disengaged students, bullying, discipline issues, low attendance, or student loneliness? What school does not face pockets of poor staff collaboration, low teacher engagement, a lack of common vision, resistance to change, poisonous gossip, or apathetic parents? Whereas in the past, schools could allow their culture to grow naturally, today's schools cannot afford to make culture building a passive endeavor. A more proactive approach is needed.

Life skills. There is an increasingly urgent call for more personal and interpersonal skills to be taught in schools. Sometimes they are called workforce-, career-, or college-readiness skills, or social-emotional learning skills, or simply life skills. Regardless of name, many students are showing up to college, work, parenthood, and life without them.
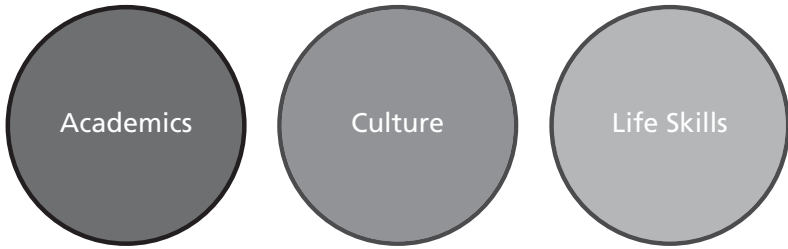
Three Evolving Challenges.

This deficit explains in part why more than 30 percent of students are dropping out of college in the first year. They lack skills for leading their lives, being on their own, or interfacing with others. It used to be assumed that they would learn such skills at home, but that no longer is a sound assumption.

Of course, none of these three challenges is entirely new. Schools have been dealing with all three for years. What is new is the seismic pressure being heaved upon educators to raise the bar in all three areas. It is all part of the new reality.

So how are today's schools responding to the new reality? According to the legendary Howard Gardner the answer is, not well. In his book *Five Minds for the Future* he asserts that "current formal education still prepares students primarily for the world of the past, rather than for the possible worlds of the future." Similarly, in *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough insists that "the conventional wisdom about child development over the past few decades has been misguided. We have been focusing on the wrong skills and abilities in our children, and we have been using the wrong strategies to help nurture and teach these skills."

But one does not need to be a guru to make such observations. How often do we hear today's business leaders groan about the new employee they hired who is very bright yet has no clue how to work in teams, to prioritize time, or to present ideas clearly? How many parents complain that their newly crowned high school graduate excelled on all the college entrance exams but does not know how to pursue a

goal, to resolve conflicts maturely, or to socialize with anything other than a digital screen? Ask these leaders and parents if they feel students are being adequately prepared for today's world, and chances are their responses will be a united and anguished "NO!"

More will be said about the three evolving challenges as the book progresses. Suffice it here to say that one reason people comment that *The Leader in Me* is perfectly matched to today's realities is that it is helping many schools to more effectively address all three challenges. And perhaps the best news is that many educators are saying, "This is not one more thing we have to do, but a better way of doing what we are already doing."

The new reality demands a new way of educating students the world over.

A New Level of Thinking?

A question always on our minds is if the field of education as a whole is approaching the three challenges at the right levels of thinking. Albert Einstein warned, "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created those problems." In other words,

before attempting to address the three challenges, we may need to step back and challenge our ways of thinking—to reexamine our paradigms.

For years, Dr. Martin Seligman has been one of the world's foremost psychologists. More recently he has become known as the father of positive psychology, a relatively new branch of study. It came about while he was president of the American Psychological Association (APA), but more specifically while he was in his garden. In his insightful book *Authentic Happiness,* he describes how he was tidying his garden one day while his five-year-old daughter, Nikki, was nearby and engaged in happy mischief. At some point Nikki's bouncing and ramblings became too much and he yelled at her, causing her to go away.

Before long, however, Nikki was back, saying, "Daddy, I want to talk to you." She said, "Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From when I was three until when I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. On my fifth birthday, I decided I wasn't going to whine anymore. That was the hardest thing I have ever done. And if I can stop whining you can stop being such a grouch."

To Seligman's credit, he listened. And after some soul-searching and marveling at his daughter's positive nature, he declared, "In that moment, I resolved to change."

That brief exchange not only inspired Dr. Seligman to change his disposition at home; it redirected his career. He realized that the field of psychology had for the better part of a century been focused on "fixing people." It was centered on identifying what was wrong and on relieving suffering. He began to wonder if there could be a field of psychology that focused instead on what makes people happy. In the process, he concluded that "[r]aising children . . . was far more than just fixing what was wrong with them. It was about identifying and amplifying their strengths and virtues, and helping them find the niche where they can live these positive traits to the fullest." It represented a new way of thinking for him.

The new way of thinking brought Seligman to reflect more deeply

on his years of counseling and researching mental illness. In looking back at what had and had not worked over the years, he concluded:

> What progress there has been in the prevention of mental illness comes from recognizing and nurturing a set of strengths, competencies, and virtues in young people—such as future-mindedness, hope, interpersonal skills, courage, the capacity for flow, faith and work ethic. The exercise of these strengths then buffers against the tribulations that put people at risk for mental illness. Depression can be prevented in a young person at genetic risk by nurturing her skills of optimism and hope. An inner-city young man, at risk for substance abuse because of all the drug traffic in his neighborhood, is much less vulnerable if he is future-minded, gets flow out of sports, and has a powerful work ethic. But building these strengths as a buffer is alien to the disease model, which is only about remedying deficits.

Seligman's readiness to step back at a mature point in his career and challenge his ways of thinking and to take counsel from five-year-old Nikki are impressive. But the reason we mention Seligman goes beyond being impressed with him. As we have worked integrally with schools in various parts of the world and studied their successes, we have seen parallels to what Seligman detected in the field of psychology.

Over the years, the field of education has developed laserlike abilities to identify students' academic deficits so that proper remedies can be prescribed. Behavioral experts have created sophisticated systems for categorizing all types of defiant or disturbing student behavior so we can accurately identify and cure what ails them. Similar tools and tactics have been designed to measure and critique teachers' performances to increase their effectiveness. Indeed we have become quite adept at identifying "what is wrong" with students, adults, and schools—all with good reason and noble intent.

Such strategies and tools have their benefits. But in our pursuit to

improve students' GPAs, have we perhaps become overfocused on students' GAPs (short for, Got a Pain)? In trying to improve teacher performance, have we turned into nothing more than a panel of critics in constant search of their "wrongs" so we can "right" them? Has the field of education become only about "remedying deficits"? Could anything be gained from stepping back, as Seligman did, to test the value of "identifying and amplifying [students' and adults'] strengths and virtues, and helping them find the niche where they can live these positive traits to the fullest"? Is there value in nurturing future-mindedness, hope, interpersonal skills, courage, the capacity for flow, optimism, and work ethic?

These and other questions have been on our minds as we approached this work. We hope you enjoy stepping back with us and exploring the education horizon in search of new ways of thinking relative to the three challenges.

Themes to Look For

As you progress from chapter to chapter, look for the following overarching themes:

A Whole School. *The Leader in Me* draws upon the talents of the whole school—*all* staff members and *all* students—and optimizes the support of parents and community.

When participants in a recent high-level leadership seminar were asked to name a person who had greatly influenced their lives, one immediately spoke up: "It was the cafeteria lady at my elementary school. School was hard for me. She was always there to ask how I was doing. She made me feel good about myself." Another said, "It was the playground supervisor at my school. One day she singled me out in front of a bunch of my friends and said I was honest. I have since tried to live up to that label." Equivalent remarks are said of librarians, custodians, aides, security staff, counselors, bus drivers, nurses, office staff, teachers, and others. Why would the talents and contributions

of all staff members not be sought out when attempting to transform a school and better prepare a child for life? *The Leader in Me* sees all staff members as contributors—as leaders.

The same is true of students. Some school initiatives are designed for gifted students; others for those with special needs. *The Leader in Me* is not limited to any group of students. When Muriel Summers, principal of A.B. Combs, was asked by a parent, "Does my child have to be a strong leader to go to this school?" she responded:

> This morning a special needs student who has an IQ less than 70 was assigned to welcome visitors to our site visit. He may not run a huge corporation one day, but he has unbelievable interpersonal relationship skills and there will be a job somewhere out there for him. He sees himself as a leader in manners. He is progressing. He feels so good about who he is despite his academic limitations. That is what this leadership model is capable of doing for all children.

> **Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.**
> —*Albert Einstein*

The Leader in Me sees all students as having strengths, as being contributors—as leaders.

A Whole Person. No two children are born completely alike. Their personalities are as diverse as their fingerprints. Yet almost as soon as they exit the womb their environment begins to shape them and they start taking on a cultural DNA, or *sameness*. When taken too far, that sameness can rob children of their unique identities, worth, and potential.

Some schools have become factories of "sameness." They operate like assembly lines for producing experts in two or three subject areas like reading, math, or writing. Each day, they essentially tell students to park at the front door their interests in art, music, computers, athletics, mechanics, drama, and so forth, and to then sit in straight rows,

remain quiet, not wiggle, and somehow stay engaged. To add insult, their worth and potential are then judged largely by their test scores in those two or three subjects.

In contrast, *The Leader in Me* seeks to develop the whole person—mind, body, heart, and spirit. It starts with the belief that there is *greatness* in every student and every staff member. Greatness is not seen as attaining a high position or accomplishing a heroic feat, but as having strong character and unique talents which may or may not include the ability to read, write, or use a calculator. *The Leader in Me* searches out talents in each student and each staff member, and provides opportunities for using and nurturing those talents.

The Leader in Me seeks to discover, nurture, and honor greatness in all.

A Whole Lot of Imagination. *The Leader in Me* is not a program, it is a process. It is a process crafted by teachers for teachers. It is not a set of scripts that come in a box. Imagination is required—and lots of it.

The Leader in Me is like an operating system on a computer or smartphone. It is an underlying philosophy that impacts many aspects of a school. Staff members and students are free to utilize their talents and imaginations to design all kinds of curriculums, programs, activities, assemblies, and events to maximize the process, so long as they are suited with its principles and common language.

In fact, the real fun of *The Leader in Me* comes when walking through a school and seeing teachers' and students' imaginations displayed all over the walls. It comes when hearing a song composed by a teacher and her students that reinforces a leadership principle. It comes when observing a lesson a teacher has given ten times previously, only to see his eyes light up as he cleverly inserts a leadership concept for the first time. It comes when seeing a student's face beam as he sits down after speaking to an audience of adults. It comes when hearing a teacher say, "I've taught for thirty years and this brings me back to why I went into the field of education in the first place."

Our experience is that most educators like being challenged to re-think, redefine, and re-imagine their schools and classrooms from time to time. Some we know even refer to themselves as "re-imagineers."

Moving Forward

So there are a few themes to watch for: a whole school, a whole child, and a whole lot of imagination. Look for them on every page.

The remainder of the book is organized as follows:

Chapter 2 continues to set context as it describes how *The Leader in Me* got started—and *why*.

Chapters 3–5 delve into the *how*—how *The Leader in Me* helps schools address the three evolving challenges and how educators are seeing it as "not one more thing they have to do but a better way of doing what they are already doing."

Chapters 6 and 7 reveal how schools are engaging parents and community members to strengthen, lengthen, and widen the impact of *The Leader in Me*.

While most examples in this book come from elementary schools, the same process can be applied to secondary schools with some adaptation. That is described in Chapter 8.

Best practices for how to launch and sustain *The Leader in Me* over time are covered in Chapter 9. And by the time you arrive at Chapter 10, which is a summary reminder of why *The Leader in Me* is vitally important in today's reality, we hope you will have enough information to decide for yourself whether you think it is well matched to today's realities and pertinent to preparing young people for their todays and their tomorrows.

We also hope that as you reach the final pages you will have become as impressed with the educators described in this book as we are. They are modern-day miracle workers. They represent only a small portion of the tremendous stories and best practices that have transpired at the more than two thousand schools. We honor them for the everyday care they put into making a difference in young lives.

Finally, we hope that by the end of the book you will have come to the clear awareness that this book is as much about you and the engaging of your talents and energies as it is about releasing the potential of students. We challenge you to be open to new ways of thinking. Consider how you can apply what you read to your unique circumstances. Spend time at the end of each chapter seriously considering the "Personal Reflections" questions. Strengthen the greatness that is in you.

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