CHAPTER 12

TEACHING

The role of the teacher is to create the conditions for invention rather than provide ready-made knowledge.

—SEYMOUR PAPERT

Imagine for a moment that you’re a rock star. Not the musical kind, but a teacher rock star. You’re a high school reading teacher, well-respected amongst your peers, who absolutely loves your job, in spite of having to teach thirty ninth-graders at once. You’ve been doing this successfully for decades: not a single student of yours makes it through your class without showing significant improvement in their reading ability. You’re especially proud of being able to motivate and help those kids who need
it most. Just this year alone you’ve already managed to raise several of your students’ reading abilities by three entire grade levels! You often wonder how they made it to the ninth grade in the first place, being so far behind, but nonetheless you’re thrilled that you were able to pull off such a miracle.

Overall the school year seems like a total success—except for one little problem. Apparently, according to your class’s test result, you have failed. Now you’re flagged as an “underperforming teacher” and are at risk of being fired.

“What the heck just happened?” you wonder.

Well, prior to the school year, your school got a new principal who had recently learned that, compared to test scores produced by some other high schools in the district, state, and around the world, your school’s students are behind—losing the race to the top. “This is an embarrassment,” your principal proclaimed upon arrival, and hurriedly gave a new mandate designed to leave no child behind, starting immediately. To accomplish this, he adopted a comprehensive set of common “core” proficiencies that included hundreds of benchmarks for all students to rush toward.

For you, this meant that it didn’t matter if your ninth graders were properly prepared in eighth grade or not. And their progress during the year was irrelevant. What mattered was whether they were able to hit those new benchmarks on schedule. To ensure this, you were instructed to use only the new, comprehensive curriculum (as opposed to last year’s) that the principal deemed was better. The good news was that resources like computers, teacher assistants, and tutors were allowed and encouraged. The bad news was that you had to find a way to pay for them yourself—and you get paid a teacher’s salary.
Toward the end of the school year, all of your students were tested for grade-level comprehension by being given the same test, which they needed to finish in the same amount of time. Any of your students who failed to perform at grade level, for whatever reason, would be held back, and you would be held fully responsible if that happened.

As outrageous as this scenario may seem, this is precisely what’s happening to teachers today. They “fail” because all thirty of their students aren’t able to meet some arbitrary benchmarks quickly enough. In this hypothetical, you failed because your students were not all reading on a ninth-grade level by the assigned test date. The ones you helped the most did not pass their ninth-grade standardized exam. When those students arrived in your class they were reading at a fifth-grade level, but by exam day you only managed to get them to an eighth-grade level, which just wasn’t enough.

The same demands are put on teachers all across the country. For example, a study done within the Chicago school system not too long ago that looked at reading levels in a fifth-grade class found that one student was reading at an eighth-grade level and another, within that same class, was reading at a first-grade level. In fact, the study found that the students in that one class were reading at six different levels. Even if their teacher was a superstar, the number of hours that it would have taken to get all of those students up to grade level, while still providing challenging assignments for those at or above grade level, would be more than the number of hours that the teacher had available.

The goals and expectations of education are not aligned when it comes to teachers, administrators, and policymakers; because of this, everyone has a different idea of what teachers should be