Praise for *Leaving to Learn*

"Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski rightly identify student disengagement as the central cause of our nation's dropout crisis. Their solution—'leaving to learn'—connects education to the real world of life and work, creating highly engaged learners in the process. Their strategy—redesigning schools in fundamental ways—is made understandable by this vivid and compelling account."

—Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education, Stanford University

"*Leaving to Learn* puts forth a provocative and powerful argument: A significant number of capable young learners are dropping out of high school not because they can't meet their schools' expectations, but because schools don't meet theirs. The authors have worked with these young people and have some exciting insights to share about student engagement and intrinsic motivation. If you're concerned about the dropout problem, you owe it to the young people in your life to pick up this book."

—Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind*

"Washor and Mojkowski make a vital contribution to reinventing high schools for the 21st century in this important book. They understand, far better than most, how critical it is to engage and motivate students—to give them a reason to want to stay in school and to learn. This book is a must-read for anyone who truly wants to 'leave no child behind.'"

—Tony Wagner, author of *Creating Innovators* and *The Global Achievement Gap*

"This book is for anyone who wants to understand how schools can ignite the passions and interests of all children and help them make a difference in their world. Supporting learning out in the world is the key to unleashing their potential and to learning who they are and what they want to become."

—Suzy Amis Cameron, founder, board chair, MUSE School California

"School isn't something that kids are trying to do. Rather, they want to succeed at important things. Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski show the remarkable transformations in schools and their students when this becomes their focus."

—Clayton Christensen, Harvard business professor and author of *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* and *How Will You Measure Your Life?*

"I applaud Elliot and Charles for their passion in serving students, impacting positive change, and ensuring we truly think about the education of our nation and beyond. This excellent book resets expectations and reengages us in the core of leadership in learning!"

—Stedman Graham, educator, entrepreneur, and author of *Identity: Your Pathway to Success*

"The authors get inside young people's heads and hearts in order to understand why and how they disengage from learning and often drop out. It's deeper than you think, the authors say, and they are right. Their solution is spot on—start with students' interests to break the cycle of failure. Here's hoping schools will listen."

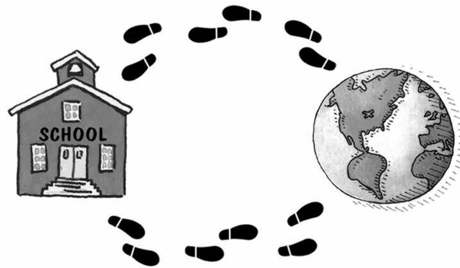
—Pedro Noguera, Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education, New York University

Leaving to Learn

ELLIOT WASHOR
CHARLES MOJKOWSKI

LEAVING TO LEARN

HOW **OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING** INCREASES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND REDUCES DROPOUT RATES



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Elliot

To my wife, Darlene, and my children,
Michael and Nathan,
for their love and support.
To all the students and staff in the Big Picture Learning
network who make leaving to learn a reality,
and to my childhood friends where I learned about
leaving to learn.

Charles

To my wife, Corinne, and my children, Ellen and Mark,
for their love and inspiration.
To Lauren, my granddaughter,
that she may find delight in learning.

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Foreword

Leaving to Learn is an inspiring and important book. It identifies many of the real issues that lie at the heart of the current crisis in education, and it says in very practical terms what should be done to remedy them.

In the United States, about one-third of students do not graduate from high school. Somewhere between the ninth and twelfth grades, they decide to walk away and leave it all behind them. In some communities, the rate is much higher. Some young people do reconnect with education in other ways, through taking the GED, for example, or through home schooling or by attending community college. Many do not. The personal, economic, and social costs are almost incalculable.

While many schools are hemorrhaging students, correctional systems across the country are filling up faster than ever. One in thirty-one adult Americans is now in the correctional system—the highest rate on earth. It would be wrong to say that students who pull out of school inevitably end up in jail. Of course they don't. What *is* true is that many of those in the correctional system did not do well in school or did drop out. In a tragic reversal of public priorities, many states are now cutting budgets for education while increasing them for the correctional system.

And yet, improving education and tackling the dropout rate, in particular, are among the nation's top priorities. Billions of dollars are spent on education every year; there are endless initiatives and countless debates on raising standards and improving results. Even so, the problems of disaffection and disengagement roll on relentlessly, and the dropout rate continues to haunt and perplex politicians on both sides. Significantly, the achievements of those who do stay in school have not improved either, despite the blizzard of legislation and special measures to "fix" education.

The truth is that most policies are tackling the problems of education from entirely the wrong perspective. Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski

agree, and their Big Picture Schools demonstrate the principles and methods on which the real solutions to the crisis in education should be based. Let me point to three of them.

First, education is always and inevitably personal. All students have their own reasons for staying in, or for pulling out of, school. Like you and me they are living, breathing individuals with their own hopes, motivations, challenges, aptitudes, and drives. The current system is failing so many of them because it is impersonal and standardized. The future lies in forms of education that are customized to the needs and motivations of the people in it. This is why this book is focused on understanding *learners.*

Second, education is about *learning.* It can be improved only through a deeper understanding of why and how people actually do learn. The current system is failing because it typically force-feeds students a dry diet of received information. The solution is to adopt forms of teaching that arouse students' appetites for learning. The best way to do that is to cultivate the powers of imagination and creativity that lie dormant in so many students and teachers alike. This is why this book has so much to say about the nature of learning.

Third, focusing on learners and learning has important implications for the culture of schools. The current system is failing because it is rooted in the industrial culture of mass production—the fixed lesson periods and ringing bells, the division of students into age groups and the curriculum into separate subjects, and the rigid barriers between school and the world outside. Schools do not have to be like this. These conventions are all vestiges of the origins of mass education in the industrial revolution. The solution is for administrators and principals to be much more flexible and creative in how they run their own schools. This is why this book has so much to say about alternative approaches to school culture and especially about partnerships with the wider community and the world of work.

Washor and Mojkowski describe a sophisticated approach in their own schools in which all students from ninth to twelfth grade spend time every week working in other settings, from hospitals to design offices to restaurants. This is the essential strategy of *Leaving to Learn*.

The arguments in *Leaving to Learn* are supported by wisdom and theory from many sources, but the case it presents is not theoretical. It is rooted in the long experience of successful practitioners who know that the approach they are commending works and that they can prove it.

Some say that we can't afford to personalize education to all students. The truth is that we can't afford not to. The price we pay for the failures of the current system is more than we can bear. To succeed as it has to, education must engage the curiosity, creativity, aptitudes, and passions of every student. *Leaving to Learn* has vital lessons for all of us on how to do exactly that.

Sir Ken Robinson

Preface

The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book. . . .
And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside,
for it had a new story to tell every day.

—Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

The inspiration for this book came as we watched a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) special on the 2008 and 2009 ceremonies awarding the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor at the Kennedy Performance Center, in Washington, DC. Created by the Kennedy Center, the prize recognizes humorists who have had an impact on American society in ways similar to those of nineteenth-century author and humorist Mark Twain (a.k.a. Samuel Clemens).

The awards ceremony is a decidedly highbrow affair for often lowbrow humor and humorists. The first recipient, in 1998, was the late Richard Pryor. Born in Peoria, Illinois, Pryor was expelled from school at fourteen and joined the U.S. Army but spent a good bit of his tour of duty in an army prison (Als 1999). The late George Carlin, comedian and actor, received the award in 2008. Carlin spent only three semesters at a Manhattan high school and briefly attended another in Harlem, dropping out in the tenth grade. While moonlighting as a disc jockey for a local radio station, he earned his high school equivalency diploma (Carlin and Hendra 2009). Comedian and writer Bill Cosby was honored in 2009. Cosby failed tenth grade and chose to apprentice at a shoe repair shop rather than repeat the year (Smith 1997). He joined the U.S. Navy and passed his high school equivalency exam while enlisted (Adler 1986). Cosby later returned to school, earned advanced degrees throughout his life, became an accomplished educator, and, as a major part of his life's work, used his talents to support educational opportunity (Maxwell 2010).

Watching the PBS program, we thought about how Pryor, Cosby, and Carlin, through their insightful and wry observations, made us laugh at ourselves and think differently about our society and have now received a national honor for their performances and writing. Not bad for three high school dropouts. Then again, who better than three castaways to become, true to Twain's legacy, social critics and contributors to a better society? Like Twain, they used humor to illuminate our follies and foibles, even our misdeeds.

As you might expect, Twain was also a dropout. His formal education ended when he was twelve years old, when he became a printer's apprentice and editorial assistant for his brother's newspaper. He then chose not school but the Mississippi as the classroom in which he learned to be a river pilot (Paine 1916). In his later years, school was definitely on his mind, however ("I never let my schooling interfere with my education" is a famous quip (Ayres 1987)), and it was a source of humor in his early novels. Twain was awarded a Doctor of Letters from Oxford University in 1907, finally obtaining that elusive degree (*New York Times* 1907).

We asked ourselves whether there were other Twain prize recipients who dropped out of high school or college. Research revealed that Carl Reiner, Jonathan Winters, and Whoopi Goldberg were high school dropouts. Steve Martin, Lily Tomlin, and Neil Simon were college dropouts (The John F. Kennedy Center 2011). Lily Tomlin (the 2003 awardee) entered Detroit's Wayne State University as a premed student because she wanted to be a doctor. But what she really wanted "was to have autonomy. In those years—remember, this is fifty years ago—you either had to be exceptional or be married. I never wanted to be dependent on anybody, and I was darn good in science." In her spare time she acted in school plays. After dropping out of Wayne State, she moved to New York and appeared in a variety of cabaret shows before she got her big break on the sketch-comedy television show, *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (*Time* magazine 1977).

You might argue that Mark Twain, in the late 1800s, could do quite well without a high school diploma—many did back then—but times are very different now. Or you might contend that these dropouts are hu-

morists and entertainers who did not need to learn Boyle's law or the Pythagorean theorem. Beyond encouraging them as class clowns, what could their schools have done to prepare them for their careers?

Even in these very different times, many famous people in all walks of life, of whatever race, class, or gender, have done very well without obtaining a high school diploma. Many other famous people never obtained a college degree, currently considered the green card for a successful career. Beyond the glare of celebrity are many more who left school and found success in widely disparate careers. These high achievers did most of their learning outside school (Coster 2010, Drell 2011).

American business magnate and philanthropist Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard University. He said it was a hard but necessary decision if he was to launch what would lead to Microsoft (The Gates Notes 2010). Mark Ecko, the founder and chief creative officer of Ecko Unlimited, left the Rutgers School of Pharmacy to pursue a career in clothing design. Today, Marc Ecko Enterprises, based in New York City, is a billion-dollar group of fashion, media, entertainment, and lifestyle companies (Marc Ecko Enterprises 2008).

American jazz saxophone player Stan Getz received straight As in school and was very proud of being near the top of his class in sixth grade, even as he played the sax nearly eight hours a day. He dropped out of high school despite being accepted into New York's All-City High School Orchestra and received free private tutoring from the New York Philharmonic's Simon Kovar, a bassoon player. The school system's truancy officers sent Getz back to the classroom, but he became a ward of bandleader Jack Teagarden, escaped their clutches, and never returned (Gelly 2002).

We could go on, but we've made our point. Many successful people left school without a high school or college diploma, and few from our list—Bill Cosby is an exception—ever returned. They dropped out to find better opportunities to develop their talents; without the learning they acquired outside school, it is unlikely they would have achieved to the degree they did. Ironically, many successful-in-life dropouts later receive honorary degrees but continue to feel inadequate without that high

school diploma or college degree. Society frowns on and stigmatizes those who leave or never formally graduate. They really do miss something by leaving.

Ah, you might say, of course the people you mention had to leave to learn. Look at the drive they had! But isn't that 20/20 hindsight? Aren't you influenced by what you know now about these billionaire business moguls or talented artists and scientists? Would you have recognized their potential when they were still in school? Perhaps not. And how many talented students are today's schools failing to recognize among the nearly seven thousand who drop out every day?

Of course, few who drop out end up reaping outsized rewards. Many do poorly. Most who leave permanently to do their own thing don't do it well and struggle for many years or their entire lives. This is why educators say, "Just stay in school." What would you advise students who are considering leaving school to pursue some interest or are just bored silly—stay in school and soldier on? If they stay in school, will they have as much success? More? Different?

Staying the course is not a satisfying answer unless it is accompanied by a deeper understanding of what drives young people to leave school. We would like to ask successful dropouts: "If your teachers had asked you to bring your out-of-school interests into school and used them to engage you and shape your in-school learning, would you have stayed?" We think they would answer yes, particularly if that learning and work received recognition and academic credit. This is the essence of our insight and inspiration: how can we create schools that learners never want to drop out of, because there they are encouraged to learn by way of their out-of-school interests, learning that is blended with the learning they do in school?

Most education reform and redesign initiatives are not making a significant difference in the near-term and long-term prospects of many of the young people who attend school. We need, therefore, to approach the challenges more fundamentally. We need, as someone has said about the U.S. economy, "architectural change," change that will reduce the current dropout rate in urban high schools by 50 percent or more. Equally impor-

tant, schools need to address the needs of the large number of young people who are "leaning toward leaving," remaining in their seats but dropping out in their heads.

Gary Hamel, a business advisor to organizations throughout the world, has written, "Strategy is revolution; everything else is tactics" (Hamel 1996). We have a bold strategy for revitalizing schools and for graduating and preparing young people for success in their future learning and work. This "leaving to learn" strategy is driven by our image of that future. Our goal is not merely to graduate every student but to prepare graduates who are uncommonly ready for success in their workplaces, their families, and their communities.

Our goal is not merely to graduate every student but to prepare graduates who are uncommonly ready for success in their workplaces, their families, and their communities.

What if there were lots of places where students with similar interests could form learning communities to learn more, both within and beyond those interests, from experts and peers? What if the school embraced an extended world of learning resources that appealed to and engaged young people in learning? What if there were ways to provide and give credit for learning wherever and whenever it occurred? What if the solution to preventing students from dropping out is to create deeply engaging learning opportunities and learning environments for *every* student?

Unlike many who write about improving schools, we work in schools that we have designed and continue to support—schools that respond positively to those "what ifs." Big Picture Learning schools are unconventional because we take an unconventional view of how schools might provide learning opportunities and environments that maximize learning for every single student. Much of our practice deliberately runs counter to accepted understanding about what constitutes success and how every student might achieve it. Core design components include personalized learning plans that start with students' interests and needs, learning through projects, learning in the real world, performance assessments, family engagement, and technology applications that support all aspects of the school and curriculum.

We are practitioner researchers; we pay close attention to research about how people learn in schools and in the real world. We are avid users of formal educational research but skeptical of it as well, primarily because of its considerable variation in quality and utility. We pay particular attention to the research on motivation and creativity. We challenge our own practice, principally by observing how young people use schools and the ways they interact with their teachers. Learning and improving are built into the culture of our Big Picture Learning schools, which is why many of them are second and third generation.

We draw much of our inspiration from watching the ways people think, learn, and perform in their occupations and in pursuing their interests and hobbies. We talk with many people in different walks of life: creative artists, scientists, tradesmen, magicians, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and tinkerers. How do they learn in their profession, trade, or craft? How do they learn by tinkering? By do-it-yourself projects? We observe the ways that people, especially young people, go about learning "when the teacher's not watching."

Lord John Reith, the first director-general of the British Broadcasting Company, once observed, "There are some people whom it is one's duty to offend!" (Ramachandran 2004). As we comment on what passes for innovation in the prevailing zeitgeist regarding school reform, we will undoubtedly offend some people. It cannot be otherwise. Our schools have become weapons of mass disengagement. Any serious effort at reforming them will necessarily entail a fundamental redesign, and ours is exactly that.

The world outside school has many stories to tell our young people and provides a powerful setting and context for their learning. Schools need to find a way to harness that resource. This book shows the way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a long time coming. It could've been—no, it nearly was—more than 500 pages. We hope that we have succeeded in distilling from all of our learning what is most useful for our readers. Working as practitioners, researchers, and change agent provocateurs provides us with invaluable perspectives, but it also weighs heavily on our time to reflect and write.

Many people have inspired and informed our work and specifically this book. We extend deep appreciation to the hundreds of students we have observed and talked with over the years. We have learned much from their stories. We are grateful to the families and mentors who have supported our students in their out-of-school learning.

Scores of principals and teachers in our Big Picture Learning schools provided us with examples of their work. Big Picture Learning staff members, past and present, have contributed to our learning journey. And, outside our own network, numerous colleagues have helped to improve the practices we write about here.

Dennis Littky, Big Picture Learning's cofounder and codirector, has been a decades-long codreamer and codesigner.

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Introduction

Early in his presidency, President Obama (2009) stated that "dropping out of high school is no longer an option" (para. 66), signaling his intention to ensure that all young people obtain a high school diploma so they can earn higher wages, contribute to society, and lead fulfilling lives. Unfortunately, however, many youth *do* consider dropping out a viable option. And they don't just drop out of school; they drop out of productive learning and come to see themselves as failures. Nearly four years later, in January 2012, little progress having been achieved, the president called yet again for a response to the dropout crisis (The White House and Obama 2012).

His continuing concern is not misplaced. The nation's graduation rate for 2009 was 75.5 percent (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hornig Fox 2012). More than one million students fall through the cracks in the high school pipeline every year (Balfanz et al. 2012), and nearly five million eighteen- to-twenty-four-year-olds lack a high school diploma (Princiotta and Reyna 2009). Approximately forty million Americans older than sixteen have not finished high school (Gewertz 2011). Among industrialized democracies, the United States ranks twentieth out of twenty-eight in the proportion of young people who finish high school (Princiotta and Reyna 2009). And those nongraduates are disproportionately members of historically disadvantaged minority groups (Balfanz et al. 2012).

These statistics are disturbing, and their persistence suggests intractability. Despite our schools' best efforts—and enormous increases in funding—the percentage of young people who leave high school without a diploma has hardly changed.

Alma Powell, Chair of America's Promise Alliance, illuminates the dimensions of the tragedy:

> If 7,000 children went missing today in this country, there's no doubt about what our response would be. Our communities would mobilize

> all the resources at their disposal to get them back. The story would dominate the media. There would be urgent investigations and new policies to prevent it from happening again. Yet in a very real way, we *are* losing 7,000 children—not just today but every day that school is in session. They are dropping out, and most will not come back. (Powell 2008)

Unfortunately, Mrs. Powell's illustration does not include an estimate of the even larger number of students who disengage from learning at some point during their high school or college experience but never actually drop out. We don't know about their talents or their post–high school trajectories. Many students—in college as well as in high school—who persist through graduation would love to leave to learn but don't know how to do that learning outside school and connect it to school for academic and graduation credit.

Perhaps the dropout rate could be lowered if, as President Obama suggested in his January 2012 State of the Union Address (The White House and Obama 2012), Congress just passed a law against it. We see that as counterproductive. To improve the education students receive so that they don't want to drop out requires understanding why young people leave school without obtaining a diploma. A 2010 synthesis of the dropout research, *Achieving Graduation for All: A Governor's Guide to Dropout Prevention and Recovery* (Princiotta and Reyna 2009) (a report we contributed to), identified four major reasons young people leave school without a diploma: academic failure, behavioral problems, life events, and disinterest.

These four factors—we call them "the big four"—explain much about the motivations for dropping out. Lifting the cover and looking a bit closer, however, reveals that it's much deeper than the big four. Based on our years of observing students in our own schools and listening to their stories, we have identified four additional factors, "the deeper four," that reveal even more about young people's perspectives: not fitting in; not mattering; overlooked talents and interests; and restrictions.

Not only are the reasons for dropping out deeper than we think, dropping out is in large part a consequence of a more widespread prob-

lem—the disengagement of students from their schools and from productive learning. Like the Russian *matryoshka* doll, the dropout crisis is nested within disengagement, thus motivating and requiring the dual focus of this book. The deeper four explain not only the large number of dropouts from our schools but also the even larger number of disengaged students who stay in school but drop out psychologically.

We hear often of the "high expectations" schools must have of and for their students, yet we seldom hear of the expectations students have of their schools. Students' expectations constitute the new "rules of engagement" in the relationship that young people want with their schools. Their expectations, framed as questions, are:

We hear often of the "high expectations" schools must have of and for their students, yet we seldom hear of the expectations students have of their schools.

Relationships: *Do my teachers and others who might serve as my teachers know about me and my interests and talents?*

Relevance: *Do I find what the school is teaching relevant to my interests?*

Authenticity: *Is the learning and work I do regarded as significant outside school by my communities of practice and by experts, family, and employers?*

Application: *Do I have opportunities to apply what I am learning in real-world settings and contexts?*

Choice: *Do I have real choices about what, when, and how I will learn and demonstrate my competence?*

Challenge: *Do I feel appropriately challenged in my learning and work?*

Play: *Do I have opportunities to explore—and to make mistakes and learn from them—without being branded as a failure?*

Practice: *Do I have opportunities to engage in deep and sustained practice of those skills I need to learn?*

Time: *Do I have sufficient time to learn at my own pace?*

Timing: *Can I pursue my learning out of the standard sequence?*

These are reasonable expectations, and they make clear that the real plague we're suffering is extraordinarily high levels of student disengagement and that dropping out is the ultimate consequence of that disengagement. Forcing a disengaged student to stay in school—whether by social pressure or by government edict—is as severe an indication of the failure of our educational system as a dropout is.

Crafting effective solutions involves a thorough understanding of the deteriorating relationship between young people and their schools—*how* as well as *why* students disengage. Increasing engagement and thereby reducing the number of dropouts requires that schools aggressively address student expectations, actively soliciting students' responses to these questions (much the way a Fortune 500 company might survey its most valuable customers) and welcoming the opportunity to reconstitute and revitalize the relationship they have with their students and focus that relationship on productive learning.

Inspired by Seymour Sarason's definition (in his 2004 book, *And What Do YOU Mean by Learning?*) (Sarason 2004) of productive learning as learning that "engenders and reinforces wanting to learn more" (x), we describe productive learning as denoting rigorous student work that focuses on demonstrations of competence and leads students to seek higher levels of accomplishment through craftsmanship, mastery, and artistry. Three perennial questions need to be addressed related to productive learning:

1. What constitutes success?
2. What is important to learn to achieve success?
3. How should schools help students learn productively?

Although our answers to these questions are neither definitive nor unchanging, we see productive learning as applied in three important life roles: the workplace, the family, and the community.

Traditional instructional processes and assessments cannot bring all students to competence, much less craftsmanship and mastery. To keep students in school and engaged as productive learners through to graduation, schools must provide many experiences in which all students do

some of their learning outside school. All students need to *leave* school—frequently, regularly, and, of course, *temporarily*—to stay in school and persist in their learning. To accomplish this, schools must take down the walls that separate the learning that students do, and could do, in school from the learning they do, and could do, outside. The learning in both settings and contexts must be seamlessly integrated.

ALL STUDENTS NEED TO LEAVE SCHOOL—FREQUENTLY, REGULARLY, AND, OF COURSE, TEMPORARILY—TO STAY IN SCHOOL AND PERSIST IN THEIR LEARNING.

We call such a program "leaving to learn."

If the notion of leaving school in order to learn appears counterintuitive, that's all right. It is fair to ask: How will students learn anything if they are not in school? To answer this question we need to push back the boundaries of what we take for granted about learners, learning, and schools. We see leaving to learn as quite normal; in Big Picture Learning schools nearly all our students do a considerable amount of their learning outside school. It's natural for us to think about ways in which students can leave our schools—and all schools—to learn and bring that learning back into school.

Leaving-to-learn opportunities include internships, travel, community service, work, entrepreneurial ventures, and gap years. Many schools provide a few of these opportunities, but it is rare to find whole-school leaving-to-learn programs that are open to all students in all grades, are an integral part of students' learning plans, and are awarded academic and graduation credit. By employing such programs, schools can deliver on students' expectations and help them learn at "the edge of their competence." It's not just about getting students out early and often, but about what they do when they get out and how they bring their learning and accomplishments back to school. Drawing on the world outside school to identify the structures and cultures required to make leaving-to-learn work effectively, we see new roles for educators as talent spotters, travel agents, brokers, and personal trainers and coaches.

Leaving-to-learn programs also help schools address another population of young people—those who have recently dropped out and wish to drop back in. These "come back" programs also help the school reach

out into the community (physically and virtually) to bring learning resources to young people in out-of-school settings.

The new policies and protocols that support leaving-to-learn systems need the support of parents, employers, and the community. All those who serve young people, whether through their policies, programs, or practices, need to embrace truly significant innovations, quite unlike the current timid, toe-in-the-water initiatives that have required the president to reiterate his plea for education reform.

Few of our Big Picture Learning students drop out, even though the overwhelming majority of them have encountered some or all of the big-four reasons for doing so. Why do they stay? For many reasons, but principal among them is that our schools pay close attention to the deeper four and address student expectations. Much of each student's highly motivational and engaging learning takes place outside school and is recognized as important and eligible for academic credit.

Leaving to learn is not a theory but a carefully honed system that continues to evolve in a hundred schools around the globe. We are also helping many non–Big Picture Learning schools adapt the system for their students. These questions guide our narrative:

- What do young people want from their schools?
- How can leaving-to-learn programs significantly increase the number of young people who stay in school through graduation, deeply engaged in productive learning?
- What are the critical design features and components of leaving-to-learn and come-back programs?
- What changes will educators need to make in their schools to support leaving-to-learn and come-back programs?

Most young people find school hard to use. Indeed, many young people find school a *negative* learning environment. Not only do schools fail to help students become competent in important life skills, they provide a warped image of learning as something that takes place only in schools, segregated from the real world, organized by disciplines and school bells, and assessed by multiple-choice, paper-and-pencil tests. Schools have

scores of written and unwritten rules that stifle young people's innate drive for learning and restrict their choices about at what they want to excel, when to practice, from whom to learn, and how to learn. It is no wonder that so many creative and entrepreneurial youth disengage from productive learning. They recognize that staying in the schools we offer them constitutes dropping out from the real world.

Schools largely ignore the abundant research on learners and learning, particularly that dealing with motivation, engagement, and creativity. Attention—giving it to each young person in exchange for his or hers—is the name of the game that schools refuse to play. Schools' attention deficit disorder is a threat to their success. Sir Ken Robinson (2001) and other authorities on creativity and invention remind us of the dire consequences of ignoring and failing to develop the innate creativity and inventiveness of our young learners.

To get to something really different and better, educators need to think about learners and learning differently. They need to question their taken-for-granted assumptions, forget what they know about schools, reason with a beginner's mind, and see possibilities with new eyes—particularly through the eyes of one young learner at a time.

If you are not ready to think and act so differently, it might be best to look elsewhere for your school reform design. But relinquish any thoughts of addressing the deeper four and delivering on student expectations, and resign yourself to living with high dropout rates and levels of disengagement. John Masters, an Australian oilman, once said:

> You have to recognize that every "out-front" maneuver is going to be lonely. But if you feel entirely comfortable, then you're not far enough ahead to do any good. That warm sense of everything going well is usually the body temperature at the center of the herd. Only if you're far enough ahead to be at risk do you have a chance for large rewards. (Biggs 2006, 120)

The real risk, therefore, is to do nothing. And, for us, and we hope for you, that is not an option.