
Cathie E. West presents a tome of checklists and advisory lists of operations and best practices for school leaders to follow covering a wide variety of situations. Her “administration-by-lists” approach creates a simplistic view of complex issues. The author precedes each list with a short vignette of situations that she has encountered during her career.

Problem-Solving Tools and Tips for School Leaders presents a paint-by-numbers approach to successful school leadership in problem areas and creates the impression that by following the course of action, as prescribed in the list, success will be reached. Building-level administration is a people business and pre-generated lists of what to do can only serve a minimal purpose.

West is at her best when she suggests lists to address the logical and prescribed sets of directives needed for mastering emergency management, stopping staff misconduct, and breaking through success barriers. She offers a series of potentially high-efficacy and useful checklists to guide the school leader to success.

Not all of the lists are potentially effective. A principal might be uncomfortable approaching the professional development aspect of the collaborative sharing of a book on pedagogy with as formal a process as West suggests. The Book Study Pop Quiz takes the collaborative aspect of this endeavor and makes it into a “classroom” process, whereby teacher reactions are recorded on paper and submitted. This is the antithesis of the kind of open discussions that sharing a professional journal or book should elicit. The author’s dependency on lists creates the kind of environment that depersonalizes interactions. The section on teacher goal planning also depersonalizes the process through the use of paper responses.

The universal promise extended in terms of using the author’s lists creates an image that this book would be more useful than it probably is in practical applications for specific schools. Reading this book does bring to mind the strength of creating lists and using them as road maps. Principals using this book can take the boilerplate protocols and create building-specific lists that will directly serve their schools.

Reviewed by Don Sternberg, Principal, Wantagh Elementary School, Wantagh, New York.

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The school reform movement in the United States has many players with various perspectives—from those who spout anti-charter antagonistic rhetoric to those who have no use for high stakes tests in public education. In A Chance to Make History: What Works and What Doesn’t in Providing an Excellent Education for All, author and Teach for America Founder Wendy Kopp elevates the discourse, and plants a firm stake in the debate about how to improve schools. By sharing lessons from transformational teachers, leaders, and schools, Kopp offers worthy insights and acknowledges that there are no silver bullets, short cuts, or quick fixes to closing the achievement gap.

“The key to success is not one-off mandates around charters, curricula, time in school, funding, and mentor programs,” Kopp writes. “The key to success is local leadership and capacity to employ all the elements of strong vision, culture, accountability, and management that distinguish highly effective organizations.” Kopp offers detailed accounts and personal anecdotes of transformational leaders who seek to end educational inequality by believing and investing in their students, forming an ambitious vision of success, and doing “whatever it takes to get there.”

Kopp cites recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers as the top priority of successful administrators, and points out, “School leaders in traditional schools often have less power to choose their teachers than leaders in charter schools, yet effective principals find a way to build their dream teams.” However, Kopp falls short in fully recognizing the detrimental impact and current constraints on public school principals who have no autonomy to hire from outside the district, and little or no recourse to fire ineffective teachers.

Kopp’s insistence on increasing the pace of change refocuses the need for systemic scale ups in transformational education. “It is possible to create a leadership pipeline in education that successfully competes for our nation’s top talent, but we have to think differently about the sorts of investments necessary to create that pipeline. By scaling up what is working in pockets across the country, we can build a diverse, high-caliber force of highly-effective leaders in classrooms, schools, and school systems,” Kopp concludes.

Reviewed by Gara B. Field, Principal, Pleasant View Elementary School, Providence, Rhode Island.