
Many students at one time or another have asked themselves, “Why must I take this test?” or “OK, I took the test, now what?” In other words, they want to know the purpose of their assessment. Some educators may also ask similar questions. Is the purpose of assessing to ascertain information about students’ current achievement levels or to find out what needs to be taught to achieve them? Heritage breaks down how educators test students and how results should be used. She also challenges educators to consider adopting a “children’s rights” assessment approach. This method suggests that educators approach assessment from the position that students should be involved and have input into their own assessment. Heritage provides innovative examples of students reflecting on their own learning. Heritage also speaks to the idea that educators test students and how results should be used. She also challenges educators to consider adopting a “children’s rights” assessment approach. This method suggests that educators approach assessment from the position that students should be involved and have input into their own assessment. Heritage provides innovative examples of students reflecting on their own learning. This book also outlines steps for developing learning progression. These steps explain how learning expertise develops over a period of time. Heritage breaks down how students begin with a limited amount of knowledge and how their thinking and understanding progresses. She also expands on gathering and interpreting evidence as well as how to use it effectively once it has been gathered. The author also elevates the support the policymakers. She proposes that they make sure their assessment policies ensure that all students are learning, regardless of their status.

This book is written in a straightforward manner and can influence teachers to change some traditional methods in favor of adopting some of these innovative ideas and procedures into their assessing practices. The book is a must read handbook for educators who want to use it effectively once it has been done. As Frederick M. Hess titled the book, these leaders do not remain “stuck in a cage” of policies, regulations, and contracts. These educational reformers drive improvement by working through the obstacles in their path. In each chapter, of Cage-Busting Leadership, beginning with one titled, “It Doesn’t Have to Be This Hard,” Hess shares examples of how superintendent principals and principals have worked around the “cages” in their districts to escape the “culture of cant’s.” Hess’s book rests on the premise that too often, policies, rules, and regulations frustrate a leader’s school improvement efforts. However, principals can work around these difficulties with creative solutions. Throughout the book, Hess examines situations that administrators often feel they are unable to change, such as a collective bargaining agreement that doesn’t allow for pay for performance incentives, or the obstacles to remove an ineffective teacher. In each case, Hess describes ways in which administrators have been able to work around the policies, procedures, and laws by just having a different mindset—that of a cage-buster. While the book offers many great examples that administrators can learn from, I caution the reader to make sure that the cage you try to bust is always based on what is best for students. For example, Hess shared a loophole around a state class size cap: allowing a district to increase their class size by adding college students to the room for work-study or internships. I disagree with this solution, based on my personal experience and the research on teacher effectiveness. This book offers concrete examples of how administrators around the country are breaking the status quo to move their schools and districts forward. It is certainly not a quick read, but it’s worth the effort if you find that your school or district is bound by bad policy, procedures, or contracts.

Reviewed by Jessica Johnson, principal of Dodgegrund Elementary School in Janesville, Wisconsin.