

# Another Way

How purposeful systems help schools succeed

By Jennifer Truitt-Lewis



**S***chools that Succeed: How Educators Marshal the Power of Systems for Improvement* (Harvard Education Press, 2017) is based on the idea that the traditional organization of schools should be replaced by systems in order to lead to high achievement. Author Karin Chenoweth reports on her “observations of educators who understand how to confront the ways in which schools have been traditionally organized and change them in ways that sometimes seem very simple and yet have profound implications for teaching and learning.” The book’s in-depth investigation of four schools shows how the traditional organization of schools can be replaced by purposeful systems that focus on high achievement for all.

In each chapter, Chenoweth describes the journey of each of the “unexpected schools”—so called due to unexpected achievement in spite of demographics that would lead one to expect low or mediocre performance, at best. The schools investigated in this book were low-performing schools that needed school improvement efforts in many areas, including, but not limited to, school culture, community support, behavioral expectations, curriculum needs, and expectations for both students and teachers. Many of the schools were marked for state takeover or other drastic measures such as rebuilding after the firing of administration and teachers.

Each school story focuses on how the staff and administration worked to achieve school success.

## Strong Leadership—and Systems—Make a Difference

These schools had all odds against them. However, with the

implementation of systems and strong leadership, they became model schools.

In each of the four schools, leaders took chances, questioned norms, and led their schools to high achievement because they thought outside the usual parameters. These leaders shared a can-do belief that students and teachers can accomplish anything with the correct support. Their vision, which included high achievement for all, accomplished via established student and teacher expectations, shaped the systems utilized.

Chenoweth devotes the majority of this book to a review of the systems put in place that contributed to the schools’ successes. She also emphasizes the fact that developed systems must be consistently reviewed. According to Chenoweth, “these schools not only put in systems but also continually evaluate them so that they can continue and expand the ones that work, or change or jettison those that don’t.” This point was the greatest takeaway lesson for me: There is a difference between having systems in place and leaving systems in place for the sake of systems. Leaders must consistently reflect and revamp as needed.


## Systems Review

This book provides a road map principals can use to develop a plan for school improvement. The motivational stories of how these schools beat the odds leads administrators to ask themselves, *How can I see the same results in my own school?*

Even though there are no one-size-fits-all answers, the author provides suggestions leaders can attempt to implement in their schools. These

suggestions focus mostly on the different types of systems that resulted in school improvement. Here is a list of the different systems that I plan to implement or review in my school:

- A discipline system that educates instead of punishes. I’d like to establish one that includes a behavioral instruction support team and focuses on building relationships and helping students learn behavioral expectations.
- A system of careful professional support for improving instruction.
- A system of getting students more instructional time via after-school and summer programs.
- A system to provide students and families with counseling and mental health services.
- A system to monitor academic achievement and progress toward grade-level standards.
- A system to build motivation and a desire to work and succeed among students.

I am motivated by the leaders and stories profiled in this book. This book makes me think, *If they can do it, so can I.* The information provided in this book also eliminates excuses that sometimes stand in the way of school improvement efforts. The audience for this book could include novice principals and those looking for a place to begin school improvement efforts, as well as anyone who is seeking motivation to overcome school challenges for the benefit of the students they serve. 

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