

# Preface to the Third Edition

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*My mission*

*is to increase student achievement  
by teaching and modeling skills and processes  
that empower those who care  
to make decisions and implement change.*

**T**hat personal mission statement was written from the heart almost 15 years ago and has sustained its relevance and rigor to challenge my practice all this time.

But that doesn't mean I've always had the right skill or process on the tip of my tongue. Take, for example, the early morning when a jangling phone interrupted my wake-up routines. I grabbed a towel with one hand and the phone with the other. An unfamiliar voice on the other end asked, "Is this the Edie Holcomb who's been consulting with the Restructuring Committee?" As I acknowledged that identity, mental red lights and alarm bells kicked in, full force. The Restructuring Committee was going quite well, but there are always those who don't want to "re-" anything. Is it a reporter? A board member? A misinformed nonparticipant? The caller continued. "Well, my name is 'John Smith.' I'm on the scheduling committee at our high school, and we've been studying a four-period day, and that's what we want to recommend to the whole faculty. But there's going to be a lot of resistance, and I was told you know a lot of group processes, and I'm wondering if you could recommend the approach that would work best." The relief that it wasn't the media was followed by sheer panic as my mental screen went absolutely blank. I fumbled with some general suggestions as I also fumbled with how to manipulate paper and pen without losing anything else I was grasping. After capturing the vital information so I could return his call later in the day, I asked myself, "If I'm the Edie Holcomb who knows a lot of group process techniques, why can't I think of a single one when I'm caught off guard like that? I need a 'cheat sheet' to hang by every phone in my house and office so I can *remember* what I know when I get these unexpected phone calls!"

A few days later, at a table littered with coffee cups and cookie crumbs, an apprehensive group of principals was wrestling with the role changes occurring as a result of the district's latest mandate for site-based management.

**xviii** ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

(The previous swing of the pendulum had been 12 years ago, and many principals had not shared that experience.) Official job descriptions and evaluation systems had remained unchanged for two decades, but every building was now to form a school council, and the administrators would be held responsible for its success. Even those most optimistic, cheering up the others with the potential for greater autonomy and authentic shared decision making, wondered whether they had the knowledge and skills to pull it off this time. One voice rose above the rest:

I'm supposed to form this team, and I don't even know who should be on it or what it should do. No one in my school—not even me—has ever been to a workshop on teamwork. We need some training first, but we have to start without it. What we need is an outline of the steps we have to take and some tools to involve people, then learn the rest as we go.

In response, I went to the easel and began to sketch an outline, which has evolved into the matrix in Figure 1.2. As I continued to work with this group and others, my friend Barb Furlong insisted that there was a “big need for help like this” and that I should write it down and get it published. So I drafted an outline and sent it off to Gracia Alkema, the president of Corwin Press at that time. I had been reviewing manuscripts for Corwin Press, and Gracia had been nagging me to write one of my own. The first edition was an attempt to help others, but it might never have happened without the helpful push from these two wonderful women.

Debates about site-based management and questions about its relationship to student learning continued to simmer. Central office colleagues wondered about their roles and responsibilities and worried about curriculum chaos and instructional improvement. So the second edition included more tools and examples to clarify district and school roles, and how to create decision-making structures within the school.

Meanwhile, the role of the federal government was billowing up into the mushroom cloud of No Child Left Behind. Authentic goal setting was giving way to externally calculated and imposed benchmarks to assure adequate yearly progress or be wiped out of existence in 2014. Some authors began to question the relevance of mission statements and school improvement plans, emphasizing the importance of teachers working in collaboration through various forms of professional learning communities. As the stress increased, so did the need for clarity and coherence about roles and responsibilities (what to do) and group norms and process skills (how to do it).

**WHAT IS NEW IN THE THIRD EDITION**

This third edition of *Asking the Right Questions* still focuses on the school as the unit of change but attends more to the three levels that create the context and impact effectiveness: the district, the school, and the classroom. New tools have been added, including Symbolic Displays, Innovation Configuration Maps, the

Priority Grid, and Open Space Technology. More examples from the field range from focusing on instruction to prioritizing for school construction. There is a new set of questions that shape practice (Chapter 7) and three questions for examining school and district improvement plans: Is our plan powerful? Are we working our plan? Is our plan working? As a contrast, there is also a segment on the *wrong* questions. A new feature is the “Answer Key” at the end of each chapter, which highlights the main points to remember.

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The more things change, the more they stay the same. We still need to remember all the things we learned in Kindergarten and play together nicely in the sandbox. And I still find my “cheat sheets” (Figures 1.1 and 1.2) helpful for diagnosing the struggle a group is experiencing and choosing skills and processes that may move them forward.

This book does not pretend to contribute a vast repository of new knowledge to the field of organizational development and school change. That knowledge is readily available, and some helpful sources are listed in the References and Further Reading. What this book adds are practical tips and stories of application and implementation from educational settings.

*Asking the Right Questions: Tools for Collaboration and School Change* has found a unique niche as a synthesizer of skills often learned in isolated fragments and of processes that now compete for the “one best way” award. It is neither a scholarly tome on change research nor an exhaustive compendium of detailed exercises defended with academic rationale. This is simply a “what can I do with my group on Monday with the skills I already have” guide for leaders of district and school teams, whether laypersons or experienced educators. It’s about empowering those who care to make decisions and implement change.