

# Preface

## How to Use *Getting Serious About the System*

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### WHY THIS BOOK?

In his foreword to Michael Fullan’s 2010 publication, *All Systems Go*, Peter Senge raises a critically important question: “Are we ready to get serious?” Citing America’s penchant for quick fixes, silver bullets, and one-size-fits-all solutions to educational problems, Senge states that searching for the one right answer to education’s problems may be part of the problem itself. That mentality keeps us “in the box” and disguises the need for overhauling the system itself. True educational change entails much more than addressing only one aspect, or component, of the system, because multiple aspects are integrally related. It also requires increasing the competencies of individuals within the system, as well as their collective capacity, to identify and then address the root cause(s) of their problems.

If we need to get serious about addressing the interrelated components and building the individual and collective capacity of everyone within the system, how is that done, and what is our plan of action? What tools and resources will we need? Where do we begin?

*Getting Serious About the System* describes a process, grounded in research, for starting and aligning improvement efforts at the district, school, and classroom levels. While the process is intended to be implemented in the local system, it takes into consideration factors at the national, state, and intermediate agency levels. It identifies components of the system that need to be considered as the focus for improvement—standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, resources, professional staff, policy and governance, and family and community. Its approach also provides a defined, but flexible, process for sustaining improvements by building competencies throughout the system to increase coherence; collect, interpret, and use data; ensure continuous professional learning; build professional relationships; and respond to changing conditions.

## **What Makes This Book Unique?**

### *Connects Levels of the System*

An emerging body of research supports the need to build districts' capacity to help schools improve. While many books have been written about school improvement, *Getting Serious About the System* begins the improvement process by "getting serious" at the district level and then shows how to extend the effort to the school and classroom levels.

### *Translates Research Into Practice*

With increased pressure from federal and state agencies to incorporate research-based strategies into their improvement efforts, district and school leaders may sometimes find themselves struggling to respond to that pressure. This book emphasizes the importance of using research in the improvement effort and goes a step further by providing specific tools, processes, and resources to enable leaders to translate research into practice.

### *Provides Step-by-Step Guidance*

Reform of this nature requires skilled leadership to help create a context for change, develop necessary knowledge and competencies, and establish structures and practices to support and maintain improvement. Workable processes for district and school improvement are described in detail in modules accessible online with the purchase of this book.

### *Organizes Selected Research on Systemic Improvement*










*Getting Serious About the System* offers educational leaders an extensive bibliography of professional literature mapped to essential components of systemic improvement. As the improvement work progresses at the district, school, and classroom levels, this bibliography will be an important resource for leaders as they investigate research-based strategies to address identified needs.

### *Provides a "Real-Life" Picture of What the Work Looks Like*

Vignettes after each phase of the systemic process help to increase the understanding of each phase by providing leaders with a picture of how the work might play out in typical districts and schools. Descriptions of challenges likely to occur in the process help the reader anticipate issues that may arise and suggest ways for facilitators to respond to them.

## **How to Use This Book**

The materials for *Getting Serious About the System* include this fieldbook, which provides an introduction to systemic improvement and detailed descriptions of each phase of the systemic approach. The fieldbook also provides access to online modules for Phases I, II, and III. (Phases IV and V do not require modules.) Each module contains a scripted facilitator guide, PowerPoint slides, tools, and handouts to help leadership teams carry out the improvement work.

	xx minutes	The amount of time a segment should take
	Handouts x & x	Handouts for the segment
	Whole group	Activity done with the whole group
	Table group	Activity done with the table group
	Partner	Activity done with a partner
	Small groups	Activity done in small groups
	Individual	Activity done individually
	Slides x-x	The slides to be used, at designated points
		Suggested script for the facilitator

Throughout the facilitator guides, icons indicate certain features that will help leaders use the guides successfully. (See chart on next page.)

All members of the district and school leadership teams should have a copy of the fieldbook (and access to the modules) as they work through the systemic improvement process.

A companion book titled *A Teacher’s Guide for Getting Serious About the System* (available from Corwin) provides basic information about systemic improvement so that everyone participating in the work (district staff, teachers, school board members, and other stakeholders) has a fundamental understanding of what will be involved and how the work will proceed. It is suggested that this book be distributed as initial decisions about whether or not to engage in the systemic process are being made, and also later as new staff or external partners become involved in the process.

## **Organization of the Book**

*Getting Serious About the System* begins with an introduction that describes the research base and the development of this approach to systemic improvement. Chapter 1 details each aspect of systemic improvement—the levels of the system, essential components that need to be addressed, and critical competencies that leaders throughout the system need to develop. It also provides a general overview of the five phases of the systemic process and what is accomplished in each.

Each of the following chapters focuses on one of the five phases of the systemic process, beginning with a synopsis of the phase and a brief description of the steps in that phase. A Phase and Competency Matrix serves as a “cross-walk” to identify the primary competencies built during the phase.

Each of the steps within the phases is then further divided into substeps and described in detail, with references to online modules as they are needed. The “Stop and Check” reminder at the end of each step helps ensure that

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SERIOUS ABOUT  
THE SYSTEM

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important actions have been completed before moving to the next step. Each phase concludes with a vignette about a fictitious district (Grandville School District) and one of its schools (Delightful Intermediate School). The vignettes describe typical challenges and successes experienced by those leading and implementing the systemic process.