

PRAISE FOR *WHOLE LEARNERS, WHOLE SYSTEMS*

It is high time to leave behind the outdated factory-model approach to secondary education. Grounded in rich case studies and focused on coherence, purpose, and equity, this book provides system and school leaders with a path forward. Fine, Rincon-Gallardo, and Fullan offer a roadmap for how to build whole systems where adolescents can thrive as whole learners.

Linda Darling-Hammond

Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus,
Stanford University
Stanford, California

This book shows how schools can address the social, emotional, and psychological needs of kids in a coherent, thoughtful, and compassionate manner. Based on case studies of school districts where such an approach has been successfully implemented, the new vision Fine, Rincon-Gallardo, and Fullan provide is one that all schools can and should embrace.

Pedro A. Noguera

Dean, Rossier School of Education
Los Angeles, California

Beautifully written, imminently practical, and realistic yet hopeful, this book is a captivating must-read on how systems can support high school transformation. Highlighting places where adolescents are thriving, the authors share rich cases of pioneering systems that integrate student learning and well-being.

Amanda Datnow

Associate Dean, School of Social Sciences,
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, California

Whole Learners, Whole Systems offers six vivid case studies of districts pursuing whole system transformation. Written in compelling prose by three preeminent educational scholars, this book is an indispensable text for anyone seeking to move school systems into the 21st century.

Jal Mehta

Gregory R. Anrig Professor of Educational Leadership,
Harvard Graduate School of Education
Cambridge, Massachusetts

What happens when high schools shift their focus from compliance and standardized achievement to each student and their agency, authentic work, connectedness, and joy? *Whole Learners, Whole Systems* provides detailed, real-world examples that ignite imagination and inspire! It shows that when leaders support the right sparks to fly, students and schools thrive.

Meredith I. Honig

Professor & Director, College of Education
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington

This book is for any education leader who is looking for a clear path toward high school transformation. Based on rigorous research and full of stories as well as tangible guidance, *Whole Learners, Whole Systems* shows how to shift teaching and learning so our nation's adolescents can learn, lead, and contribute. It charts a vision for how to avoid the tired duality of academic learning versus well-being and powerfully shows how children engage and thrive when we marry both.

Rebecca Winthrop

Director and Senior Fellow
Center for Universal Education, Brookings
Washington, DC

Fine, Rincon-Gallardo, and Fullan offer a clear-eyed and sober assessment of the current state of school in the United States and beyond. Through their engaging description of emerging and promising work in diverse school systems in California, they also offer something else: hope.

Ben Daley

President, High Tech High Graduate School of Education
San Diego, California

Fine, Rincon-Gallardo, and Fullan share how six districts have made a real impact by focusing on students, prioritizing relationships, reimagining traditional structures, and recognizing the essential role of the system in sustaining change. This book will inspire and guide any district ready to truly transform their students' high school learning experience.

John Malloy

Senior Vice-President, AASA
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

This timely book highlights what's possible in public education when districts shift from control to coherence, and from compliance to learner agency. The real stories of transformation offer critical hope and practical pathways for leaders ready to reimagine learning and well-being. A must-read for anyone who believes adolescents deserve schools that allow them to choose, connect, and contribute as whole learners.

Tom D'Amico

Retired Superintendent, Ottawa Catholic School Board
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

The authors have masterfully articulated through research and case studies a compelling call to reimagine how systems can move beyond disengagement to truly honor adolescents as whole learners, destined to thrive within learning and life. A must-read for leaders committed to helping youth succeed and in need of inspiration to make this happen.

David Keohane

CEO, College of Alberta School Superintendents
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

This book highlights the importance of engaging adolescents through a relevant and innovative curriculum, presenting fresh approaches to long-standing challenges in secondary education. Especially vital as young people navigate an increasingly complex world.

Laurence Findlay

President, Association of Directors of Education Scotland
Scotland

A rare book that allows the practitioner to see how educational theory is created. Through a close examination of six case studies, the reader is able to see how the authors derived the four S's of system change. A must read for all trying to connect theory and practice.

Alisa Berger

Executive Director, Deeper Learning Institute,
Harvard Graduate School of Education
New Haven, Connecticut

Whole Learners, Whole Systems

*To the whole learners and whole systems in our lives—and to the
many leaders who work every day to ignite and keep their spark alive.*

Whole Learners, Whole Systems

Transforming School Districts
for Adolescent Thriving

Sarah Fine
Santiago Rincón-Gallardo
Michael Fullan

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FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A Sage Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

Sage Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
10th Floor, Emaar Capital Tower 2
MG Road, Sikanderpur
Sector 26, Gurugram
Haryana - 122002
India

Sage Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Vice President, Content
and Product: Monica Eckman
Executive Content Leader: Megan Bedell
Senior Product Assistant: Nyle DeLeon
Project Editor: Veronica Stapleton Hooper
Copy Editor: Gillian Dickens
Typesetter: C&M Digital (P) Ltd.
Cover Designer: Scott Van Atta

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Jason Cushner
Mathematics Specialist, Colorado Department of Education
Estes Park, Colorado

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Principal, Tema International School, Ghana
Tema, Ghana

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Professional Development Specialist, The Digigogy Collaborative
Amherst, New York

Neil MacNeill
Former Superintendent, Former Principal, Ellenbrook Primary School
Scarborough, Western Australia, Australia

Leslie Standerfer
Assistant Superintendent of Academics, Buckeye Union High School District
Litchfield Park, Arizona

Teresa Tung
Director of Curricular Programs, Hong Kong International School
Repulse Bay, Hong Kong

About the Authors



Sarah Fine is an Assistant Professor of Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego. Her teaching, research, and leadership are rooted in the goal of transforming PK–12 schools into humanizing and intellectually vital places to teach and learn. Dr. Fine began her career as an English teacher at a public high school in southeast Washington, D.C. After completing her doctoral work at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Dr. Fine served as the founding director of the San Diego Teacher Residency, a project-based learning and justice-focused educator preparation program.

Her first book, coauthored with Jal Mehta, is *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Transform the American High School*. In 2021, the book won the Grawemeyer Award in Education.



Santiago Rincón-Gallardo's purpose is to help young people and adults rediscover and ignite the power to learn. He is an education consultant and a key member of Michael Fullan's international team. Through his work, he supports leaders and educators to liberate learning in education systems in North America, Latin America, Europe, and Australia. Santiago worked for over a decade promoting grassroots pedagogical innovations in Mexican public schools located in historically marginalized communities. This work ignited a movement of pedagogical renewal across thousands of

schools in Mexico and beyond, which continues to spread to this day. He is the author of *Liberating Learning: Educational Change as a Social Movement*. Santiago holds a doctorate in Educational Policy, Leadership, and Instructional Practice from Harvard University. He completed postdoctoral studies and was a visiting scholar at the University of Toronto. He resides in Toronto with his wife and two children. For more information, visit www.liberatinglearning.com.



Michael Fullan, Order of Canada, is the former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and Professor Emeritus of the University of Toronto. He is co-leader of the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning global initiative. Michael served as Premier Dalton McGuinty's Special Policy Adviser in Ontario from 2003 to 2013. He received the Order of Canada (OC) in December 2012 and holds five honorary doctorates from universities around the world. His "interim autobiography," *Surreal Change*, covers his pre-COVID-19 era to 2018. Michael and his colleagues are now working

diligently on field-based comprehensive system change in several countries. Under the umbrella of what they call the "humanity paradigm"—equitable-equal deep change that integrates local (school and community), middle (district/regional), and center (policy) entities. Michael's latest books are *Spirit Work and the Science of Collaboration* (with Mark Edwards, 2022), *The Principal 2.0* (2023), *The Drivers* (with Joanne Quinn, 2023), and *The New Meaning of Educational Change, 6th Edition* (2025). For more information on books, articles, videos, and podcasts, please go to www.michaelfullan.ca.

Introduction

Woodward Park was unexpectedly beautiful on that May evening. We were on the outskirts of Fresno, walking along a trail near the marshy edges of the San Joaquin River. Not having spent much time in California's central valley, we had hoped to find—at best—a decent place to stretch our legs. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, however, the landscape was nothing short of spectacular. Reeds swayed gently in the river's shallow current. A red-tailed hawk swooped low. A sign told of the reintroduction of Chinook salmon to the watershed: a glimmer of renewal after decades of degradation and decay.

It was a fitting backdrop for the discussion we were having about Fresno's schools. Over the course of several days, we had visited six of the district's middle and high school campuses, observing classrooms and talking with leaders, teachers, counselors, and students. On paper, our work was guided by academic research questions related to systemic strategies for improving adolescent learning and well-being. In our interviews, however, we stripped away the jargon. With educators, we asked, "Where are young people thriving in your schools? What has been the district's role in helping to make that happen?" With students, we asked, "Where do you feel most alive at school?"

*"Where do you feel most alive
at school?"*

The answers to these questions revealed a picture that was both troubling and hopeful.

In our conversation that night, we decided to begin with what was troubling. In Fresno, as in many of the districts we had visited, core academic courses remained stagnant. In a math class, students copied worksheet answers from each other. In a history class, a handful of students took notes on a lecture while the rest stared out the window. In an English class, a few students listened to the audiobook version of a novel while others sent text messages on half-hidden phones. There were certainly some bright spots—academic classrooms where educators had found ways to reignite students with a sense of discovery and purpose—but these were the exception rather than the norm.

We were not surprised by this pattern. We have observed and written about it for years. Still, as we walked, we grieved it anew.

We then turned our attention to the hopeful parts of the picture. The most consistently vital learning environments in Fresno, we had found, were courses within career and technical education (CTE) pathways—a domain that, not coincidentally, has been the focus of significant district and state investments in recent years. In a media arts pathway course, students clustered in front of desktop computers, immersed in a digital storytelling project about the affordable housing crisis. In an agricultural technology pathway course, students were learning to operate a laser cutter, which they were using to create a chicken-shaped cover for a drain outside the coops they had built for the school’s beloved hens. In an entrepreneurship pathway course, students practiced presenting the pitch decks they had created for their “clients”—local small businesses that could not afford a marketing team. When we talked with students across these pathways, they were animated and effusive, explaining in detail their current work and chattering about their plans for the future: dual enrollment courses, summer internships, college.

There were also signs of hope related to how Fresno’s schools were approaching learner well-being. Virtually all of the schools we visited were piloting new practices, with many engaged in cycles of learning and iteration supported by the district office. At one school, educators showed us how teachers and students could now use a QR code to rapidly refer or self-refer to the counseling team. At another, a principal talked about the school’s decision to hold biweekly Friday afternoon pizza parties in the park to celebrate strong attendance and encourage staff and students to “play together and just *be*.” And at many of the sites that we visited, warmly appointed wellness centers now offered a stigma-free place for students to retreat, as well as a one-stop shop for services ranging from restorative justice facilitation to trauma counseling.

As we strolled along the river that evening, trying to make sense of all we had seen, the metaphor suggested by the physical space was not lost on us. As we will explore in Chapter 1, U.S. public education—like so many of the country’s essential watersheds—is in a profound and prolonged cycle of decline. Public schools, which have never been a utopia but are seen by many as a space to work toward ideals of justice and freedom, have been subjected to decades of disinvestment and misguided policymaking. The past 30 years in particular have been dominated by a myopic focus on academic achievement, which, despite its intention to reduce inequality, has yielded few lasting results and come at great cost to students and teachers.

And yet, as with the San Joaquin watershed, there are signs of renewal. In fact, in the golden light of that spring evening, we wondered if what we had seen in Fresno might be a sign that a new era in secondary education might be possible. We certainly couldn’t be sure of it. But, we wondered: *What if?* What if this was

the pre-tremor of the seismic shift that we had been dreaming of for so long? What if the renaissance underway in CTE was a signal that the whole system might be able to pivot toward purpose, engagement, and connection? What if system leaders, educators, and parents could truly begin to see well-being as a central goal of schooling? What if secondary schools could finally become places where young people—all of them—are supported to thrive?

What if this was the pre-tremor of the seismic shift that we had been dreaming of for so long?

Maybe the spring air had gone to our heads. Regardless, if there was indeed a shift underway, we felt compelled to do what we could to help it along. As it turned out, this meant writing a book.

The three of us are in some ways an unlikely trio of coauthors. Sarah, the American of the bunch, was shaped by her early experiences as a teacher and instructional coach working in an urban high school during the No Child Left Behind era. Her work during the subsequent two decades has remained unwaveringly connected to the world of U.S. public school educators and the spaces in which they learn and work. Santiago, meanwhile, spent his childhood and formative years in Mexico and started off his 25-year career in education working on grassroots-turned-large-scale projects of pedagogical renewal in remote rural communities. His current work takes him frequently across North America, Latin America, and Europe, where he works with educators and leaders of many stripes. And Michael, a proud Canadian and a giant in the field of educational change, has spent more decades than he can count working with systems leaders around the globe.

Despite our varied life experiences and lenses into the work, the three of us have much in common. We all believe that schools must find ways to tap into the capacities of young people to learn, lead, and contribute. We all know—with a pain that sometimes feels excruciating—that the reality is often the opposite. We all recognize that this is a feature, not a bug, of education systems built for compliance and social reproduction rather than for collective thriving. We all dream of helping to build something new.

On a more personal level, Sarah and Santiago share the experience of being parents of children on the verge of adolescence. We each have an older child in seventh or eighth grade. During our many calls and travels together, we often find ourselves discussing these tweens: our love and regard for them, as well as our apprehension about the looming specter of teenagehood. Michael, in turn, is a grandparent of three children, ages 0 to 8. All three of us often feel a sense of apprehension about the idea of these young people coming of age in such a

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profoundly unwell world. It doesn't help that we know so much about the ways in which schools tend to fuel disengagement and disconnection.

It is with these multiple hats in place that we write this book. In many respects, it is a book about systems: the macro-level ways that districts and other local education authorities can create momentum toward a new vision of secondary education. In many of the book's chapters, however, we do not begin with systems. We begin, instead, with students and teachers, engaged together in the daily tasks that make up the place we call school. We begin this way in part because we want to reinfuse tenderness and humanity into conversations about abstract ideas such as systems change. Mainly, though, we begin this way because we believe that any change worth making must begin—and end—with young people and the adults who show up for them day in and day out.

At the heart of this book is a set of narratives describing the work of six California education systems: five districts and one county office of education. (For ease of reading, we will refer to them in aggregate as “districts.”) By design, these systems are very different from each other. Some are urban, some rural; some are very large, others tiny; some serve predominantly low-income families of color, others are somewhat more affluent and/or White. They do, however, have one important thing in common: They are working *as systems* to initiate and/or accelerate transformations in secondary education. Within them, we found that young people and educators are becoming aware of what we call their systemness—the feeling and understanding that they are part of a system that they can collectively transform.

They are working as systems to initiate and/or accelerate transformations in secondary education.

As the cases will show, none of the six districts has solved the secondary education puzzle entirely. They are all contending with a set of constraints—and an underlying logic that predisposes schools away from the goals of deep learning, well-being, and collective thriving—which faces all U.S. educational systems. Each of the six districts, however, has made significant headway in one or more domains. As a group, they offer a glimpse into what secondary schooling could become at its best, and they suggest a set of system-level strategies and conditions that can facilitate progress.

The six districts that we feature are all located in California. This is not an accident. One of our goals in undertaking this project was to understand how high-functioning school systems are making use of large recent state investments

in education, in particular, the funds offered via the California Community Schools Partnership Program, the College and Careers Access Pathways Grant, and the Golden State Pathways Program. What our findings suggest, however, is that these grants, while important in accelerating the work, were not the catalyst for the initial shift in any of the districts we studied. To the contrary, all of them had found their way organically toward a new set of goals and strategies. To draw on a metaphor from Marshall Ganz, they had already picked a direction, gotten everyone on the bus, and started moving. The grants simply added much-needed gas to their tanks.

So, while this is a book about school systems in California, it also offers useful lessons for school systems everywhere. As such, we hope that it will be read and used widely by system leaders, school leaders, teachers, policymakers, philanthropists, and many others who work with and on behalf of young people across the United States and beyond.

A similar thing can be said about the book's emphasis on secondary education. As we will write about in the coming chapters, the developmental needs of adolescents are distinct—and distinctly misaligned with the structure of most middle and high schools. The cases that we unpack suggest that successful transformation requires leaders to recognize and address this mismatch. However, the four pillars of systems change that we write about in the latter part of the book are relevant to change efforts at all levels of PK–12 educational systems—and perhaps beyond them. Four elements—shared vision, steady work, symmetry, and systemness—form the backbone of how these school systems have been able to create meaningful and lasting improvements. Thus, while this book will be particularly useful for readers seeking to undertake transformations at the middle and high school levels, we hope that it might be useful for others, too.

The vision set out in this book is deeply informed by past and present insights into how high school change unfolds. As Andy Hargreaves (2023) reminds us, efforts to change high schools have often faltered not because transformation is impossible but because they fail to build the cultures, relationships, and political conditions necessary to sustain change. Instead of waiting for a singular breakthrough, systems can cultivate what he calls “accumulated incremental innovations” and “networked outliers”—concrete, collaborative changes that gradually coalesce into deeper system transformation.

The book is organized into four parts. In Part I, we lay the groundwork. First, we explore the current state of adolescents in the United States and beyond, highlighting the dramatic mismatch between conventional secondary schooling and what is known about adolescent development and learning. In Chapter 2, we then argue that transforming schools around goals of adolescent learning and well-being requires bold, coordinated, and systemwide change. Drawing on research

and examples, we introduce the idea of “systemness” as a way to explore what it means for education systems to move beyond piecemeal reform toward deep coherence, shared purpose, and collective thriving.

In Part II, we dive into the work of the six featured districts, treating each as a self-contained case. We begin each chapter with a glimpse into school spaces where adolescents are thriving as humans and as learners. We then zoom out to explore the system-level conditions and strategies that undergird this work. At the end of each chapter, we offer a series of questions to stimulate discussion among readers, especially those in positions of leading or enacting change within their own districts. In terms of order, the cases are organized deliberately, with the “bookends”—Lindsay and Anaheim—representing the two districts with the highest levels of systemness. Meanwhile, the four middle cases—Oakland, Fresno, Shasta County, and Monterey Peninsula—each illuminate a different piece of the puzzle, rounding out the overall picture of what it might look like and what it might take to transform secondary education systems.

In Part III, we present the four pillars of systems change we’ve already mentioned: shared vision, steady work, symmetry, and systemness. These pillars explain how the focal districts have been able to create momentum and coherence despite the inertial pull of the status quo. None of the four pillars are new, and we didn’t invent them. What *is* new is the insight that the four elements can and must be marshaled in tandem with

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each other in order to produce durable systemic change that reaches into and feeds from classrooms.

Finally, in the Conclusion, we look to the future. The role of policy and philanthropy in the coming years, we argue, is to support more districts in deliberately cultivating the four pillars of system change. They can do so by unyoking system leaders from the old game of narrowly imagined and narrowly measured achievement, by replacing outdated ideas such as “seat time” with indicators more aligned to deep learning and well-being, and by ensuring that districts have the resources to pursue new directions over the long term. This will require clarity and steadiness from both policymakers and funders—symmetry at the macro-systemic level. For leaders and educators working closer to the ground, meanwhile, we suggest that they begin by thinking about how they might cultivate the four “Ss” within their own contexts, beginning with the work of defining a vision that is *co-created, compelling, coherent, and clear*.

We write this book in the spirit of what Jeff Duncan-Andrade calls critical hope. At a moment of political, ecological, and educational crisis, we seek to remain clear-eyed about the immense work that lies ahead while also offering real examples of transformational practice that can light a path forward. The districts that we showcase in this book have catalyzed deep changes *despite* the broader system. Our goal is to position these cases as harbingers of what could and should be done with the system's support—so that we can collectively accelerate a movement to transform the experiences of adolescents in school. They surely deserve the very best that we can offer.

PART I

The Case for Whole Learners, Whole Systems

Why Whole Adolescent Learners

We begin our exploration of adolescents with a glimpse into the six districts that will be featured later in the book:

- In Lindsay, a group of seniors at the district's alternative high school sit in a circle during their hour-long advisory period and share their feelings about their imminent transition to adult life. They are remarkably raw and vulnerable with each other. One student talks about her fear of leaving Lindsay's rural and tight-knit community and attending college in the city. Another shares that it feels both exciting and heavy to know that he will soon have to support himself financially. There are murmurs, nods, fist bumps, and even some tears.
- In Oakland, a senior in a media academy classroom cues up her latest project—a short documentary on the city's immigrant rights organizations. She explains that after weeks of research and interviews, she now sees advocacy work in a whole new light. "I thought I knew a lot about immigration issues, but hearing people's stories firsthand made me understand the fight in a deeper way," she says. Nearby, her classmates are editing promotional videos they are producing for local nonprofits, their screens filled with colorful clips and animated text.
- In Fresno, eighth graders enrolled in a middle school ethnic studies course are working in small groups to make posters about systems of oppression that they have chosen based on their interests: heterosexism, classism, racism, colorism, colonialism. Their task is to create a poster and an accompanying presentation that will explain each system to an audience of sixth graders. As the students work, they are relaxed but focused, collaborating to decide on the best words and illustrations to bring their concept to life for younger learners.

- In Shasta County, a group of high school juniors sits in a semicircle, leading a discussion on the dangers of vaping and substance use with ninth-grade students from nearby schools. The juniors, who are part of a countywide student-led prevention program, have spent weeks researching, preparing materials, and practicing their presentations. Today, they are sharing their findings by using interactive activities, personal storytelling, and open discussion to make the information engaging and relevant.
- In Monterey Peninsula, inside the auto-tech workshop, the air hums with the sound of drills and the low murmur of students working together. A group of seniors is gathered around an electric golf cart that they have spent the past few weeks repairing and modernizing. “We want to give it to the school football team for medical assistance during games,” one student shares. He gestures toward a metallic cube he welded, proudly explaining how he has learned to diagnose and fix engines, fabricate parts, and troubleshoot electrical systems.
- In Anaheim, ninth graders enrolled in a cybersecurity CTE pathway are sitting in their linked learning “cyber English” course. They have been reading *The Door of No Return* by Kwame Alexander, and today they begin class by playing a digital version of a traditional West African game featured in the chapter they are about to read. The students are engaged in the game but transition quickly when it is time to take out their reading response journals. Later, in interviews, they tell us that they love the class because it blends literary analysis with digital projects, which allow them to apply their coding skills in creative ways.

These varied scenes have an important element in common: adolescents who are thriving through learning. By engaging in the tasks at hand, they are learning more about themselves, forging deep relationships with each other, making real contributions to their local communities, and exploring ideas related to the complex world that we all share. At the center of the work is their need to choose, to connect, and to contribute. They are using their hands, their minds, and their hearts. In short, they are being supported to thrive as *whole learners*.

Unfortunately, however, this reality is not one that prevails in most American secondary schools. To the contrary, the scenes above stand in stark contrast to a pattern of low expectations and low engagement that has persisted within

American public secondary education for many years—and that has proven remarkably difficult to change, especially at the system level (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2025).

At the center of the work is their need to choose, to connect, and to contribute.

In this chapter, we build the case for taking a whole-learner approach to thinking about and

designing for the experiences of adolescents in schools. We begin by exploring the mismatch between the traditional secondary school experience and the developmental needs and capacities of teenagers. This mismatch helps to explain a hard truth: American teenagers are not doing well. This crisis is not an adolescence problem; it is a systems problem. Current research on adolescence clearly shows that teenagers—despite their less than stellar reputation—are primed to engage in creative and prosocial tasks. The problem is that secondary schools systematically fail to tap into these needs and capacities, fueling a vicious cycle that threatens nothing less than the health of our entire society.

This crisis is not an adolescence problem; it is a systems problem.

THE GREAT MISMATCH: WHAT SECONDARY SCHOOLS GET WRONG

What do traditional middle and high schools get wrong about adolescents? Almost everything.

We really do not think that this is an overstatement. Think about the typical way that a high school student might spend their weekdays. They wake up early—too early given the biorhythms and sleep needs of the adolescent body—and hustle to school for their first class. They most likely have not chosen this class. They certainly have not had much say over what they are expected to learn, how and when to learn it, who they learn it with, or how they will be assessed on their learning. Rarely, if ever, do their interests, identities, or aspirations show up in the curriculum—and when this does happen, it is usually only a little while before it is time to move on to the next task. Having experienced all of this year after year, the student slumps their way through their first period class, resigned to accepting a passive role.

Strike one: a lack of agency.

The morning wears on. Every 53 minutes, the bell rings, signaling 7 minutes of “passing time,” during which the student must hustle from one part of the school’s sprawling campus to another. If the student spends too much time connecting with their friends, they risk getting in trouble. If the student realizes that their homework is in a locker on the other side of the school, they risk getting in trouble. If the student needs to use the bathroom, they risk getting in trouble. Even if they are on time and prepared for their next class, they have less than an hour before the bell rings and the process starts all over again. Each period brings a new group of peers, a new social dynamic, a new set of worksheets and assignments, and a new adult who—no matter how much they care about their teaching and their students—is subjected to a similarly fragmented routine.

Strike two: a lack of opportunities for positive and sustained connections.

There is also what happens around the edges of the school day. If the student is lucky enough to have found their way into an “extra” that they enjoy, they might spend their elective period and/or afterschool hours rehearsing with the band, conducting an interview for the newspaper, running sprints, or painting the set for an upcoming dramatic production. These kinds of pursuits provide a pleasurable counterpoint to the boredom and passivity that they experience during the rest of the day. If they are not involved in these kinds of activities, however, students inevitably seek stimulation in other ways. They might scroll endlessly through social media, on the hunt for something interesting. They might cruise the neighborhood with their friends, looking for thrills. Or they might find themselves taking a hit of something that promises to break up the monotony.

Strike three: limited outlets for productive exploration and risk-taking.

In their recent book, Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop (2025) posit that adolescents tend to respond to the problematic structures of secondary schools by falling into one of four categories. Some teens actively resist the institutions and adults around them, initiating a vicious cycle of punishment and restriction. Others are “quiet quitters,” going through the motions with a minimum of effort or interest. Still others achieve in all the ways that are asked of them and more—but often sacrifice their intrinsic interests and well-being along the way. Only a small fraction of teens, the authors argue, manage to hold onto their innate capacity to explore and learn.

Another way to think about the problem, as Sarah and Jal Mehta wrote about in their book *In Search of Deeper Learning* (Mehta & Fine, 2019), is that secondary schools focus myopically on certain ways of knowing and being. The work of the head is cut off from the work of the hands and the heart. Formal academic knowledge is given far more attention and weight than community and cultural knowl-

In this kind of an environment, nobody—neither young people nor educators—can hope to be whole.

edge. Academic disciplines and their rigid boundaries reign supreme, with little attention to the possibilities opened by working on cross-cutting problems in cross-cutting ways. And individualism and competition often prevail, with learners conditioned to see their progress and achievement as separate from that of their peers rather than as a collective goal. In this

kind of an environment, nobody—neither young people nor educators—can hope to be whole.

A DEEPENING CRISIS IN ADOLESCENT LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

To be clear-eyed about the problem is to recognize that what was already a bad situation has gotten significantly worse. Nearly 20 years ago, findings from a survey of more than 80,000 adolescents across the United States found that three-quarters of all high school students felt bored in school every day, with more than a third reporting that they saw no personal relevance in the material they were required to learn (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). In the decades since these data were first released, the situation has worsened. In one recent study, only 4% of adolescent students reported having a learning environment that regularly lets them develop their own ideas or have a say about what happens to them (Geraci et al., 2017, p. 19). Larger-scale surveys and research studies consistently find that many adolescents feel disconnected from school, disengaged from the content they are asked to master, and alienated from the relationships that might support their growth (Winthrop et al., 2025). More than 70% report that their schools feel like “uncaring” environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). These experiences cut across lines of race, class, and geography, although they are experienced most acutely by students who face systemic barriers related to poverty along with racial, cultural, and/or linguistic marginalization (Quintana & Mahgoub, 2016).

But, you might ask, are secondary school students at least *learning* more than they were 20 years ago? Did all those years of data-driven decision-making and racing to the top at least ensure that schools are doing a better job when it comes to reading, writing, and arithmetic?

Alas, the answer is a resounding “not really.” Academically, among eighth graders, the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed universal literacy declines along with declining math achievement for historically marginalized populations such as students identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and students with disabilities. Reading scores for 13-year-olds, in fact, are almost unchanged from when the test was first given more than 50 years ago. (Math scores have gone up slightly but are still significantly lower than a decade ago.) In addition, overall enrollment in higher education has also dropped over the past decade, driven mainly by declining enrollments among male students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Compounding these issues is the fact that chronic absenteeism has soared, with only a slight rebound in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic first shuttered schools (Malkus, 2024).

The picture when it comes to the system’s most privileged students—the high achievers whose scores put them in the top quartile of test score distributions—is

These “wounded winners,” as Michael calls them, learn to succeed at the game of school but often do so at great personal cost.

somewhat rosier. For these students, however, the system often produces a different kind of harm: a high-pressure environment focused narrowly on academic achievement, which can lead to anxiety, perfectionism, and a diminished sense of intrinsic motivation (Anderson & Winthrop, 2025; Haidt, 2024). These “wounded winners,” as

Michael calls them, learn to succeed at the game of school but often do so at great personal cost.

This, in turn, brings us to the most troubling pattern of all: the crisis in adolescent well-being. If teenagers were whiling away the hours in relatively good humor, enduring bouts of boredom at school but emerging with an intact sense of hope and self-efficacy, we might not be sounding the alarm so loudly. Instead, however, there is evidence of a worsening adolescent mental health crisis that predated the pandemic and shows few signs of easing (Richtel & Flanagan, 2022). Persistent sadness and hopelessness among high schoolers, for example, have increased by almost 50% since 2011 (Braganza & Lin, 2024). The political and economic instability of our broader society, along with the warping effect of smartphones and social media, are certainly not helping (Haidt, 2024). There is evidence, however, that school is also a big part of the problem, with students identifying factors such as school-related stress and social isolation as significant contributors to their unhappiness (Monaghan, 2024).

It does not have to be this way. Research in the emerging field of the science of learning and development makes clear that adolescents thrive when they are engaged in meaningful work, when they have supportive relationships with adults and peers, and when they are able to exercise agency in their learning (Cantor & Osher, 2021). Researchers have used these principles to develop specific design principles for schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024), with some arguing that thriving needs to be seen as *the* purpose of public education in the 21st century (Hannon & Peterson, 2021). But most systems do not create the conditions for secondary schools to enact such ideas—in part, we believe, because they are built around a warped view of adolescence.

ADOLESCENCE: COMPLEX, AMAZING, AND ESSENTIAL

One of the core perspectives of our work, and of this book, is that our society’s dominant views about adolescence are problematic. Our culture defaults to a view of adolescents as being unstable, untrustworthy, unresponsive to adult guidance, and dangerous. Popular culture plays up this characterization, sometimes even fetishizing it. Meanwhile, institutions such as schools and prisons respond to it by

doubling down on a logic of containment and control—which is applied with extra force when the adolescents in question are Black, Brown, and/or poor.

Teenagehood isn't always easy for those living through it or those adjacent to it. It can surely be a stormy period of development. But, as with any good storm, it also contains power, beauty, and transformative potential. As Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (2018) puts it, adolescence is when we invent ourselves. It is a profound process of *becoming*. This process may not always be elegant or linear, but it is necessary and amazing—and when we see it that way, everything changes.

Throughout much of Western history, adolescents were not seen or treated as a distinct group. There were children, and then, once these children reached sexual maturity and could manage a full day's work, there were adults. Of course, many cultures had rituals for marking the transition between these two phases. Some even had learning traditions that built a bridge from one to the other, such as the process of becoming an apprentice and then a journeyman in medieval Europe. It was not until the early 20th century, however, that Western cultures came to see the period from age 12 to age 24 as a distinctive period of human development. Not coincidentally, it was around the same time that the United States began to prohibit child labor and pass compulsory secondary education laws.

The introduction of adolescence as a concept is attributed to the pioneering work of American psychologist Stanley Hall. Seen by many as the founder of the field of child psychology, Hall coined the word *adolescence* and wrote extensively about the specific characteristics that he saw as being central to this period of development—namely, conflict with adult family members, moodiness, and risk-seeking behaviors (Ross, 1972). Hall famously summarized adolescence as a time of “storm and stress.” As we alluded to above, Hall's work has had lasting impacts on the ways that American society, and American psychologists, tend to view teenagers. Contemporary research in neuroscience and developmental psychology, however, suggests that adolescence is an extraordinary and essential period of development—one that includes ever so much more than just storming (Arnett, 2006).

THE INCREDIBLE ADOLESCENT BRAIN

In her book on the adolescent brain, neuroscientist Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (2018) uses new insights from research to argue for a more asset-focused view of teenagehood. The capacities and needs of developing young people, Blakemore argues, are indelibly linked to the neurological changes taking place in the teenage brain. For example, synaptic pruning—the “use it or lose it” process by which the brain consolidates certain neural pathways and gets rid of others—allows teenagers to engage in increasingly complex thinking. Relatedly, the adolescent brain is also undergoing a process of neural integration, by which different regions become able

to communicate with each other more efficiently. This allows adolescents to develop stronger gist thinking (e.g., the ability to understand and analyze the big picture of a situation). Their capacity for self-reflection gets better, too, as do some elements of their ability to engage in creative and divergent thinking.

Blakemore (2018) also uses studies of the brain to show why teenagers are so often prone to heightened self-consciousness and embarrassment. During adolescence, she shows, the brain and psyche are forging both a sense of self and a “looking-glass self.” “We are constructing who we are and how we are seen by others,” she writes,

and goes on to show that as this new consciousness begins to develop, adolescents are constantly—and involuntarily—thinking about how their actions might be judged by others, even when the audience is imaginary (p. 20).

risk-taking does not automatically mean engaging in antisocial or dangerous behavior.

Finally, Blakemore (2018) addresses the elephant in the room: risk-seeking behaviors. In adolescence, the limbic system—the parts of the brain associated with reward processing—is hypersensitive. Low baseline levels of dopamine, paired with a high dopamine response to stimuli, mean that adolescents crave stimulation and novelty. This indeed leads to risk-taking behaviors, widely documented as a core feature of adolescence across a wide range of cultural contexts. Blakemore and others, however, help to show that risk-taking does not automatically mean engaging in antisocial or dangerous behavior. Prosocial risk-taking, such as trying a new activity, performing in front of an audience, tasting a new food, exploring a new place, or even “trying out” a new perspective during a conversation or debate, can produce a satisfying sense of stimulation—at far less cost than trying addictive substances or driving recklessly.

THE ADOLESCENT SOUL: CRAVING CONNECTIONS

In the opening number of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s hit musical, a teenage Alexander Hamilton is characterized as “longing for something to be a part of.” In Miranda’s account, this fierce desire for connection and purpose was the source of Hamilton’s commitment to fighting for, and later helping to build, the “young, scrappy, and hungry” nation that was soon to become the United States.

Whether or not this portrayal is historically accurate, the play captures something essential about the adolescent soul. Teenagehood might in part be about distinguishing oneself from others, particularly from one’s family, but it is also a time of searching for connection. In this respect, it is often an extended quest to identify communities and causes that feel worth belonging to.

Ideally, this search can be a fluid one with low stakes and multiple positive options. Adolescents are also looking to *contribute*—to find ways to participate

authentically in the “real world” of their communities and the wider world. Physically and cognitively, they are more than capable of doing so. Remember that until a century ago, many young people began taking on the economic and social duties of adults as early as 12! While we would never go so far as to argue against the extension of formal schooling beyond childhood, we also believe that secondary education systems, in their current form, often overlook the adolescent need to explore healthy forms of participation in adult life. We will suggest later in the book that well-designed programs in Career and Technical Education, with their emphasis on helping young people “try on” possible future selves, their inherent porousness to the world beyond school, and their many opportunities for apprenticeship-style learning, can begin to address this dilemma.

Adolescents are also looking to contribute—to find ways to participate authentically in the “real world” of their communities and the wider world.

ADOLESCENCE AS ESSENTIAL TO HUMAN CIVILIZATION

In *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik (2016) advanced a startling new thesis: the idea that adolescence, along with childhood, could be one of the keys to the survival of our species. Her argument begins with the fact that humans stand out from other species as having an unusually prolonged period of childhood and adolescence relative to their life span. Gopnik suggests that this has a key evolutionary survival function. Childhood-adolescence, she argues, is a period when young humans are protected to play, learn, and experiment with new approaches and ideas, without the costs and potential consequences associated with doing so as an adult. In turn, this protected period of exploration creates a repository of fresh thinking that can serve as a source of ideas and solutions for addressing emergent challenges and changes in the environment.

We are surely in need of some fresh thinking. In our current state of massive disruption and upheaval—technologically, politically, economically, and environmentally—humans will need to muster a tremendous array of new ideas to make it to the other side. If Gopnik is right, constraining the adolescent experience to the stale structures of conventional secondary schooling means drying up the soil where these ideas could be germinating. In short: Failing to transform secondary education is just one more way that we are putting the survival of our species at risk.

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RECLAIMING WHOLENESS

Adolescents deserve so much more than they usually get from their education systems. They deserve schools that feed their hunger for exploration, recognize their need for purpose, and help them connect more deeply with themselves and others. They deserve schools where they are treated with love and care. They deserve schools where they can thrive as whole humans.

They deserve schools where they are treated with love and care.

Such places do exist. There are plenty of examples of schools, and even a few examples of school networks, where educators have managed to buck these patterns. For the most part, however, schools that are intentionally designed around the needs of adolescents function as islands, with the broader systems around them remaining largely stagnant. A promising new program might come along, or a new initiative or curriculum, but these are usually add-ons or afterthoughts. The system changes them more than they change the system—and large numbers of students continue to lose out.

It is high time to take a new approach: a whole systems approach.