

Leadership for Equity and Excellence

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CHAPTER TWO

Learning to Believe the Dream Is Possible

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

-United States Declaration of Independence

There still continues today... to be just an incredible array of negative stereotypes about native people... We have in this country way too many negative stereotypes about black people, and about Latin people, and all kinds of people; it's just an incredible problem we deal with Everybody's sitting around this table, and they're all looking at each other with stereotypes, and they can't get past that. It's like everybody's sitting there and they have some kind of veil over their face, and they look at each other through this veil that makes them see each other through some stereotypical kind of viewpoint. If we're ever gonna collectively begin to grapple with the problems that we have collectively, we're gonna have to move back the veil and deal with each other on a more human level.

-Wilma Mankiller (1993), former chief of the Cherokee Nation

Through our own efforts to create equity and excellence in our schools and through our research on equitable and excellent public schools and districts (e.g., Scheurich, 1998; Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001), we have come to understand the central importance of individual and shared beliefs. Some people call these beliefs or "values," some call them "ethics," others call them "commitments."

If you are going to successfully lead a school to attain both equity and excellence, you first have to believe it is possible. If you don't have that belief, you are going to have to develop it because having, deepening, and sustaining this belief is central to convincing others, central to maintaining this belief over the long haul, and central to creating equitable and excellent schools.

Take a few moments to think about your answer to the following reflective question: *Do I — deep inside where my most firmly held and private beliefs reside — truly believe it is possible in the immediate future to create and sustain schools in which literally all children will be highly successful?* Try to make a distinction for yourself between whether you want to believe that this

is possible as some idealized dream, or whether you really believe that it *is* possible in the immediate present.

If you decide that your answer to this question is "yes," then the content of this chapter will be useful to you in sustaining and deepening that belief and in communicating it to others who may not share it. If you decide that your answer to the question — at this point — is that you *want* to believe that truly excellent and equitable schools are possible in the ideal, but that you do not really believe that such schools are achievable, then the discussion that follows hopefully will help you understand and change that belief.

First, we will discuss some barriers you may have that prevent you from believing in the reality of equitable and excellent schools. Second, we will discuss strategies for acquiring the belief if you don't already have it. Then, we will discuss what it means once you do have such a belief.

BARRIERS TO BELIEVING

Why do people, why do teachers and administrators, believe that children of color and/or children from low-income homes will, in general or on average, not do well in school? (When we use the phrases "on average" or "in general," we understand that there are always exceptions.) Certainly, it is true that, on average, children of color and children from low-income homes do not currently do as well in school as white middleclass children. This is a well-known fact, which is commonly referred to as the "achievement gap" in U.S. education. The important question, though, is why does this gap exist?

You probably have some answers to this in your mind. Most educators do, as do most other people. The most common answers educators and the general public give have to do with causes that are external to education, as Haycock (2001, p. 9-10) found in her research:

Over the past five years, staff members at the Education Trust have shared... data on the achievement gap with hundreds of audiences all over the United States. During that time, we've learned a lot about what people think is going on.

When we speak with adults, no matter where we are in the country, they make the same comments [about the children who are on the wrong side of the achievement gap]. "They're too poor." "Their parents don't care." "They come to school without an adequate breakfast." "They don't have enough books in the home." "Indeed, there aren't enough parents in the home." Their reasons, in other words, are always about the children and their families.

The typical external cause answers we most often hear are similar to those expressed by Education Trust's interviewees. These include that some children are genetically less intelligent, that some parents do not know how to help their children succeed in school, that the culture of

the children and parents does not value or support education, and that the child does not come to school "ready to learn" with skills and attitudes needed to succeed.

Of course, anyone who has heard any one of these answers probably has heard several, as they are commonly circulated among educators and the general public. Many of these answers are interconnected or interrelated, but the point of all of them is that the cause or causes for the differences in achievement among different student groups is external to the educational system and, thus, not the fault or responsibility of educators. That is, if any of these or a combination of any or all of these external causes is the answer to why children of color, children from low-income families, and/or children of different cultures or home languages do not do as well in school, then, seemingly, we as educators are not at fault. This means the so-called achievement gap is not our responsibility.

It is very worrisome that the answer educators give results in the conclusion that educators have no responsibility for the achievement gap. It seems all too easy, even self-serving or self-protecting, for us to give an answer that relieves us of any responsibility. Perhaps we should be suspicious of such easy answers. Let's think about this.

First, the common belief in genetics as the cause of differences in educational achievement requires us to be very direct about what such a belief means. If someone believes in genetics as the reason children of color and children from low-income homes do not do as well in school as middle-class white children, it means that this person believes that people of color and people with low incomes are not as smart as white middle-class people and that the cause of this difference is genetic. This means that people of color and low income generally are genetically born with less intelligence than are white middle-class people. In fact, this is the argument made in a fairly recent, though controversial, book, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1996).

Although we know from research done by some of our students that many more educators actually believe in this genetics explanation than is commonly thought (see Marx, 2002; McKenzie, 2002), it is really a deeply horrible and terribly wrong explanation. In fact, it unquestionably is blatant racism. The overwhelming, inarguable conclusion of thousands of scientists all over the world is that this belief is false (see the following books for a thorough debunking of *The Bell Curve* and its arguments: *Intelligence, Genes, and Success: Scientists Respond to The Bell Curve*, Devlin, Resnick, & Roeder, 1998; *The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence, and the Future of America*, Fraser, 1995; and *Measured Lies: The Bell Curve Examined*, Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Gresson, 1996). As science has progressed, especially as genetic science has progressed, it has repeatedly been shown that any belief that there is a genetic difference in intelligence by race or income is totally, unquestionably, inarguably false. It is very simple: We are all the same human beings. Appearance differences, such as skin color or the shape of one's eyes or the size of one's nose, are completely irrelevant to intelligence.

Yes, there are a few books, like *The Bell Curve*, and a few scientists that argue the opposite, but they represent only a tiny, tiny percentage of the scientific evidence relevant to this matter. To believe today in a genetic difference in intelligence for the different races is similar to believing that the earth is flat (in fact, scientists have concluded that trying to separate out different "races" is virtually impossible; race is not a fact, it is a social construction). The absurdity of such a belief is beyond question, but sadly, painfully, this belief does continue, even among educators.

Now, some people would say to us, "Why do you even legitimate this genetic explanation by discussing it?" The reason we discuss it is that in our experience, and in the work other researchers and our own students have done, there continues to be a significant number of educators who still believe in a genetic explanation — especially because there continue to be many who hold this as a hidden or covert belief. This means that they know it is politically incorrect to express this belief, but inside they continue to believe it — and this belief drives their actions as educators and as citizens

We do not think it is useful to conceal the fact that this genetics-oriented racism still exists. In addition, even many who do not centrally hold this view have a little bit of it left in their minds. In fact, if we could be totally honest, all of us probably have a little bit of it in the corners of our consciousness and unconsciousness. The historical past just does not disappear overnight, and this genetic difference belief was once dominant — historically speaking, not very long ago — among virtually all white people in U.S. society. (For an excellent discussion of the history of this belief in the United States, see Valencia's 1997 book *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking* and, further, his 2000 book *Intelligence Testing and Minority Students*). Consequently, all of us must be very careful that this old belief may still hold some barely conscious or some unconscious influence on our thinking.

Most educators, though, have consciously left this belief behind. Instead, the answers that now dominate responses to the question of what is the external cause of children of color and children of low-income families not doing as well as others, in general, in our schools, are what might be called *social* answers. By social, we mean the cause is not seen as physical or genetic; it is seen as arising out of a social situation, context, or history.

These social causes are all those, besides the genetic one, that we offered earlier: (a) Some parents do not know how to help their children succeed in school; (b) the culture of the children and parents does not value or support education; or (c) the child does not come to school "ready to learn" with skills and attitudes needed to succeed in school.

All of these social causes seem like reasonable or acceptable explanations to most of us today. However, these are a complex set of causes. Some of them are factually true in some sense. For instance, middle-class white parents do typically know more than low-income parents or parents of color know about how to help their children succeed in school as school is typically conducted today (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Moreover, some children, including those from

low-income homes and many children of color, begin school with fewer formal educational experiences than do other children who may have had the benefits of preschool. However, how these "facts" are true — in some ways, but not in other ways — is a complex issue, which we will address here as we go along.

In regard to the beliefs that educators hold about the external social causes of differences in achievement, research shows that many of these beliefs are factually false. For example, recent research (that has been undertaken in more culturally sensitive ways than was research conducted in the past) shows that members of cultural groups often labeled as "uncaring" about their children's education — that is, African Americans and Mexican Americans — strongly support the education of their children (see Delpit, 1996; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). In other research done when one of us, as part of a research team, interviewed adults who had grown up as children in families that did migrant agricultural work, the research participants repeatedly said that all of the migrant parents they had known believed strongly in education (for some of these interviews, see *The Labors of Life/Labores de la Vida*, Guajardo, Sanchez, Fineman, & Scheurich, 1999, a documentary video available through the lead author of this book).

Nonetheless, we know that, in fact, many educators do not believe that parents of color or members of cultures of color want or care about educational success for their children. We know that many educators can come up with what they see as examples proving that these parents and their culture do not care. Yes, there are some parents of color who don't care about their children doing well in school, but there are also many white middle-class parents who don't care about their children not doing well in school. However, when researchers carefully and sensitively study parents of all races and cultures, they find that virtually all parents strongly want their children to be successful in school and will do whatever they can to support that success.

Unfortunately, some of the research that several of our doctoral students have done shows that many teachers harbor cultural, racial, and class stereotypes about parents of color and low-income parents (see Marx, 2002; McKenzie, 2002). This research shows that even when faced with factual evidence to the contrary, many teachers continue to hold fast to stereotypes, labeling the factual and research evidence as the exception and not the rule. For example, some who teach children of color have a strong belief that very few of their students' parents care about schooling. Even if contrary examples are pointed out, these teachers still cling to their belief, often by citing exceptions they know about. When these teachers were asked in McKenzie's research whether they knew the parents or had been to their homes, their answer was typically "no." After working with these teachers to get them to reflect on these beliefs, McKenzie concluded that the teachers strongly protected their negative stereotypes about the parents — in the face of evidence to the contrary — to justify their own lack of success with the children of color in their classrooms.

This presents us with a difficult problem. How many of us are so heavily invested in our stereotypes that we resist contradictory information? Indeed, isn't that how a stereotype works — by ignoring and resisting evidence to the contrary? Why do some of us strongly hold on to the belief that parents of color and low-income parents don't care? Why do some of us believe that cultures of color do not value education? Why are some of us working so hard to find an external justification for our lack of success with our children of color? What if it is our problem instead of our children's parents' problem?

Part of this stereotype against parents of color and their parenting is held because the white middle class (of which teachers, overwhelmingly, are a part) has a picture or characterization of correct parenting that differs from the approach to parenting in other cultures. For instance, the middle class tend to believe that children should be raised directly by the parents, whereas people in some cultural groups, including many Latino, Native American, and African American cultural groups, believe that grandparents or older uncles and aunts (some of whom may not even be blood relatives) can and should play major roles in raising children. Many white middle-class people then assume that any child not raised mainly by the parents is at a deficit as far as schooling is concerned. However, we know of no evidence that shows that children raised by extended family members do not do as well in school as children raised by their parents.

Another part of maintaining the stereotype is that "looking down" on some other group makes us feel better, makes us feel superior. Perhaps, even our identities as a people are wrapped up in having some groups to feel superior to. Besides, if these other groups are not inferior, then we may have to conclude that not being successful with children of color or children from low-income families is really mainly our fault, rather than theirs.

Educators, though, need to understand that these kinds of conclusions about parents and cultures of color cannot be supported by research, nor are they useful or productive if we are going to create equitable and excellent schools. It is extremely important that we recognize that we live in a multicultural society and that different cultures often do things in different ways. We also must recognize that children from many different cultures and cultural patterns of parenting can do well in school.

Furthermore, we need to recognize that we can create schools that value, appreciate, honor, and incorporate other cultures, and we don't mean just through food and holidays. We mean through deep connection and engagement with all of the parents and cultures of our children. As some (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll, 1992) have suggested, educators in typical schools often assume unconsciously that the values, beliefs, behaviors, and other attributes of the white middle class are the right and best ones, even when the schools that these educators work in serve children solely from other cultures. However, too many people who daily practice and love their own cultures have become successful in business, scholarship, sciences, the arts, and other fields for us to assume that the white middle-class culture is the only right way to do

anything. Yes, as Delpit (1996) and others have suggested, children of color need to learn the white middle-class culture because it is so pervasive, but this doesn't mean that we cannot also learn and value deeply all cultures within our country. Indeed, the main culture of this country, the white middle-class one, has always been a deep intermixture of numerous other cultures. Thus, the idea that the culture of one group has to be the only one used in schooling is really silly.

Our job as educators, then, is twofold. First, we need to confront our own beliefs about parents and cultures of color. Second, and also very important, we ought to engage with these parents and cultures in a positive way (in particular, see the work of Moll, 1992, and Gonzalez, Moll, & Tenery 1995, for an assets orientation to other cultures; see, also Kuykendall's *From Rage to Hope*, 1992). Rather than trying to find deficits or negatives that we can posit as causes for the achievement gap, we need to understand and focus on the assets in these cultures so that we can build positively on them to educate all the children of our country's different cultures.

We have, however, still left one area unaddressed. This is the assumption that parents of color and low-income parents do not understand what they need to be doing with their children to prepare them for school, or that these parents do not themselves have the school skills to pass along to their children, or both. The result of either or both of these factors is that children of color and children of low-income parents do not have the attitudes, skills, and/or knowledge that we commonly believe children need to come to school with to do well in school or, at least, to start school properly prepared. The headline of a recent editorial in *Education Week* (Price, 2001, p. 48) addressed this issue in the following way; "The Preparation Gap: Eliminate It First, Then the Achievement Gap."

While this may seem like a simple issue, it is, like other issues we have discussed here, actually more complex than is commonly assumed. It is a fact that, on average, white middleclass children do start school with more school success attitudes, skills, and knowledge than do children of color and children from low-income families — given the way school is currently conducted.

For the moment, let's give those of us who believe in this external cause the benefit of the doubt. Let's say there is a "preparation gap" that precedes the "achievement gap," as the *Education Week* editorialist wrote. Let's, just for a moment, say that, on average, parents of color and low-income parents don't prepare their children for success in school in ways that are a good match for the schools their children will attend.

Even if this is taken to be true, does this mean we cannot be educationally successful with these children? Is it an inarguable inevitability that if parents don't properly prepare their children in advance of sending them to school, there is no way we can succeed educationally with their children? For example, do educators want to say that if some children are not prepared to begin reading instruction in kindergarten, there is virtually no way we can get these children to grade

level on reading skills? This is what we are saying when we argue that the reason we have an achievement gap is because children are not properly prepared by their parents for school success. We are committing to the algorithm that if A (proper preparation by parents) is not there, then we cannot teach our students so that they will achieve B (school success).

If we think about it this way, the algorithm is false; it is just not true. We, in fact, have multiple programs, curricula, and methodologies for teaching children to read, do math, and write. No matter how "unprepared" a child comes to school, we already have many methods, curricula, and programs that have been shown to be successful with unprepared children. You only have to read, for example, *Education Week*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, or *Educational Leadership* for one year, and you will see articles about all kinds of approaches educators have devised that are successful with children who have not come to school prepared for school. Also, there are already many classrooms and schools, just like those we all work within, that are highly successful with these so-called unprepared children.

If many teachers and administrators already know how to achieve success with unprepared children, then anyone who wants to develop an equitable and excellent classroom or school can learn to do the same. The easiest thing, the thing that many educators do when they personally do not know how to accomplish success with the unprepared child is to automatically blame the external cause and then do nothing to find out how they might change what they do or how they might learn something new that will help their students succeed. Thus, those who stop and say they can't are creating and living a dead end for themselves — and for their children.

This is the real problem in our view. Many of us want to be successful with all children without learning anything new. The issue is not really that it cannot be done. We know more than enough, as Ron Edmonds (1979) used to say, to educate any child well. The real point is whether we have the will to educate any child — whether we are willing to change, to learn new skills, new programs, new assumptions, new attitudes.

Thus, even if we grant that, on average, some groups of children do come to school not prepared in expected ways, it is *not* true that we do not have any means to be successful with them if that is what we are really committed to accomplish.

OK, now we have gotten to the point of suggesting that even if we accept that some children come without the same preparation other children come with, we can still be successful with any child. If this is true, then we should, we think, dump the whole concept of "unprepared." It is a deficit idea; it starts us off with a negative attitude toward children, as if they are missing something, lacking something, have less, are less. We think that virtually everyone would agree that if you want to be successful with teaching anything to any student, it is not useful to start with a deficit view of any student who needs to learn something.

In the place of this deficit view, we would suggest, as others have, an assets-oriented view toward all students. For all children, rather than starting out with a focus on what some child or some group of children do not have — like home preparation to learn reading in English — let's start with an assets-oriented view of each child and every group of children. Let's start with asking the question "What assets does this child or this group of children bring to school with them that we can use positively to build on to be educationally successful with this child or this group of children?" Isn't this how we ourselves would best like to be treated? Don't we want others to assume we have assets, strengths, that we can use to build upon in learning something new?

This is not really a revolutionary idea. Let's say you want to build a house. You used to live where wood was abundant and cheap so most houses were built out of wood. However, now you live where wood is scarce and expensive, but rock is abundant and cheap. Do you now say that you can't build a house because wood is too hard to get and more expensive than you can afford?

You don't say this if you really want a house, but that is the equivalent of what we in education often say. We are so used to wood houses (i.e., used to creating schools that are academically successful with only white middle-class children), we say we can't learn to build rock houses (i.e., learn to educate children from other, different social groups or cultures). However, it always makes much more sense to build with what is available. This is what an assets-oriented view means. You positively build with and on the assets that already exist, on what is already available. If wood is your asset, build with wood; if rock is your asset, build with rock. If an African American culture, a Mexican American culture, a working-class culture, an extended family, or a language other than English are the assets available, build positively on and with these assets.

For example, if a student's culture provides stronger support for group learning than individual learning, let's use that positively as an asset. This does not mean we don't sometimes use individual learning, but we start by building positively on the assets the children bring to school with them: the cultural assets, the home and family assets, and so on. Or, let's say that within a student's home context, older children are routinely expected to provide care for younger children. Let's use this as an asset in education. Let's have the older children assist in teaching the younger children.

Often migrant children are seen as being at a deficit, but research on their lives indicates they often hold more responsibility in the family than middle-class children hold in theirs, that they often have seen more of the "world" than their peers have, and that they have had to work much harder than most middle-class white children ever will. In fact, don't we often value those who understand how to do really hard work? Don't some even berate middle-class families for not teaching their children to work hard? If you want people who understand hard work, you want

migrant workers and their children. Thus, let's look for and view experiences of different cultures and different ways of life as a positive, as assets to build education on.

Indeed, in a research project that one of us was involved with, led by our colleagues Pedro Reyes, Lonnie Wagstaff, and Jay Scribner (see Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999), it was found that in some schools and districts migrant children typically did as well as any other students and in some cases routinely did better. Why? The answer is because these successful schools and districts did not characterize these students as being in or having a deficit. Instead, these schools and districts were perceptive about the lives of these students, highly valued these students, built positively on their assets, and created programs, methods, procedures, and ways to ensure that they too could be academically successful. In short, there was nothing wrong with the students or their lives (i.e., deficit thinking), and no one treated the students as if there were. The problem is how we characterize the lives of our children, how we value them and their cultures, how we see the assets in their lives, and how we build positively on those assets.

As we mentioned before, this is the very point that scholars like Ladson-Billings (1994) or Moll (1992) have made. Ladson-Billings and others, like Hollins (1994), recommend that we positively use the culture that the child brings to school to successfully educate that child. Moll takes his preservice teachers out to the communities in which their children live so the teachers will learn the assets of those communities and so they can use those assets positively in their classrooms and schools. Moll says that all children have "funds of knowledge" that come from their experiences, their families, their communities, and their cultures and that we should use those assets, those funds of knowledge, in positive ways to successfully educate children. We believe that this idea or this approach, whether it is called "assets-based," "culturally congruent pedagogy" or "funds of knowledge," is a powerful idea that we should all learn to use.

Our job as educators is to be educators of all children. To be an educator is to be an expert at successfully teaching children — any and all children, not just some children. We would question whether we can legitimately call ourselves educational professionals if we can only successfully teach children from one group (like white middle-class children, for instance), or if we can only teach the way we were taught when we were children, or if we are restricted to being successful with only those children who fit the way we were taught to teach in college five, ten, or fifteen years ago. An educational professional, in our view, is one who can accomplish his or her work given new situations, new students, or new contexts. If we only know how to serve one kind of child and insist that we cannot succeed with any other kind of child, we simply do not understand how we can claim that teaching is a real profession or that educators are real professionals.

Our job as educators is to be professional experts at teaching children — no matter who those children are, where they come from, or what they bring with them or do not bring with them. If we don't know how to be successful with some particular child or some group of children, our

professional commitment and our professional expertise should drive us to find out how others are doing what we do not yet know or, if necessary, to create new solutions.

As we said in the first chapter, we think we can be smarter and more creative than just continuing to use the old methods that don't work for diverse children. In every field of human endeavor, people have faced new situations of all sorts and have found solutions. In every field, there have come times when many said we couldn't; then some said they could, and they did. Actually, we don't think it is really that difficult to successfully teach *all* children if we just decide that we can.

In fact, there are already available many different solutions that educators have already devised to successfully educate all students. If we will just get rid of the "can't," decide that we can, and start looking around for those answers, we will find them. Teachers and whole schools are already succeeding educationally with any child in any context that we have or can imagine. We only have to explore, read, and work at it to find these teachers and schools. We can learn to educate differently. We can learn to educate all of the children that are in our classrooms and our schools. Really, the most important barrier is in our minds, in our beliefs — not in some external cause.

LEARNING TO BELIEVE

The best way to acquire a belief in the possibility that literally all children can be highly successful in school is to experience for yourself schools where this is the case. Many teachers and school leaders of color and those from low-income homes do not have to become convinced that all children can succeed because they themselves were those children. They know firsthand from their own experience that "all children can learn." Other educators work in schools in which excellence and equity are realities, and they have learned directly from their coworkers and colleagues how to teach and administer in ways that create such success. For example, one of us had a white woman student who as a new reading teacher started in an urban school dominated by children of color from low-income families. She had all the barriers we talked about above, and she definitely had a deficit attitude about the children in her classroom. However, she was lucky enough to go to a school in which there was a strong group of Latina teachers who themselves had come out of low-income Mexican American families. They worked with her and mentored her so that she changed her beliefs, and, as a result, she became highly successful with her diverse children. Then, when we asked her whether it was possible to get children of color from low-income homes to read on grade level even if they had not been prepared to read by their parents, her answer was "of course." What had she learned that the rest of us need to learn?

If you have not had such success experiences yourself, one excellent way to develop a belief in equity and excellence is to go see classrooms, schools, and districts that are accomplishing such

success or are making great strides toward accomplishing it. Another way is to talk to others who have chosen the same journey of equity and excellence. Some of these educators will have come to believe in the journey, and some will be on their way toward believing it — just as you are — and they will be from all races and cultures. Wherever anyone is on this journey, they will have good information, ideas, or experiences to share. So, in your school, your district, your city, nearby areas, your state, or at conferences, seek out others who are on this same journey. Seek out those who are already achieving equity and excellence and those who are learning to do so. Become friends with these people and share with and support each other. Build a network of those committed to gaining equity and excellence in our nation's schools.

Another thing that will help you to believe in equity and excellence is to read about it. This book will help you. There are also many articles and books that can be found through libraries and the Internet and through professional organizations, like the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). Indeed, ASCD constantly presents workshops and conference sessions on this subject and publishes many books and videos on it. It is a treasure trove for this kind of material, but it is only one among many others, including the publisher of this book.

Finally, some people can just make a leap of faith. These people say to themselves, "Equity and excellence are the right things to believe in. I may not know now how to do it, but I am going to make a leap of faith that I can do it. Somehow I will figure it out, and I will not quit until I do."

CONCLUSION

Let's say we are now in this place together. We are now on the same train. We believe that it is possible to develop schools that are both equitable and excellent. We have visited other classrooms and school that have already become both equitable and excellent. We have connected with and developed relationships with others with the same commitments. We have read about it. We have disposed of or are working hard to dispose of any barriers we might have had at some point to achieving such success. We no longer believe that external causes are sufficient reasons to not educate all children well. We have switched from a deficits orientation to an assets orientation in our thinking about all children. We no longer focus on what children don't have; we now focus instead on what assets they do have and how we might build on those assets so that all children can be educationally successful.

Thus, we have decided that our job, our work, our commitment as educators or as educational leaders is to develop classrooms and schools that are both equitable and excellent. We believe in it. We are going to do it! But what now, where do we go next? That is what the rest of this book is about. The rest of this book covers specific areas related to helping you "do it." However, before we go there, let's pause a moment.

To create an equitable and excellent classroom or school, we need to make the commitment to do this the heart of our efforts. Every day, every week, we need to reaffirm our commitment to this. This is a righteous journey, a democratic journey, a spiritual journey. However, it is not always going to be easy. Sometimes, we all will get down or depressed. There will be failures; there will be barriers and difficulties. There will be some who will work hard to stand in our way or make fun of us, who will call us naive or idealistic. However, those who succeed at any great endeavor — and this is a great endeavor — do not allow excuses, do not allow themselves to stay stuck in "down" or "failures" or "difficulties." Those who succeed say to themselves that no matter what, "I am — we are — going to succeed!" They just won't quit; they just will not take any excuses. Moreover, even if we have not done this in the past, any of us can start now. We can decide that we are going to be the ones who carry this great endeavor forward.

This is simply too important for us to fail or quit at. This *is* a great endeavor. We are on the front lines of a great and truly important civil rights struggle. We are the carriers, the foot soldiers, of a mighty dream of equity in this country. Every day in our classrooms and schools, we are either moving this dream forward or we are not. Its success is in our hands, individually and collectively. Remember, we didn't choose money, or fame, or power; we chose to be teachers. We chose to be able to say that when our work is done, its effects aren't just big houses or fancy cars. We don't strive to see our names in the news all the time. What we do as teachers and school leaders, even if society will not adequately reward our work or recognize it, is the very foundation of the future of our society. We teachers and leaders are the ones who make this future. If it is to be an equitable one, if we are to realize the dream, it really is in our hands. We are the ones who can make the dream come true.

In the next chapter we address the large issue of standards and curriculum, an issue that is currently receiving considerable public and educator attention. We discuss why we think standards and curriculum alignment are necessities for equitable and excellent schooling.