What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

"Constantly bombarded by new innovations that fail to yield promised results, education leaders often grow frustrated and discouraged. Rather than becoming skeptical of all innovations, DeWitt advises leaders to become thoughtfully discerning through the process of de-implementation. It's wise advice that is long overdue and vitally important."

—**Thomas R. Guskey**
Professor Emeritus, University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY

"STOP. We add, reform, innovate, and tinker but rarely consider how to reduce and halt that which has the least impact and distracts from the joy of teaching. DeWitt invites you to reflect, respond, and remove, and introduces the notion of efficiency into your life. This book in education is so overdue. It is the Konmari decluttering bible for schools."

—**John Hattie**
Emeritus Laureate Professor, University of Melbourne
Co-director of the Hattie Family Foundation
Carlton, Vic, Australia

"Schools are busy places that are often filled with the debris of failed initiatives. DeWitt's latest book tackles this unspoken challenge head-on. Highlighting the science of de-implementation and presenting a practical framework, his book is a must for any leader seeking support in clearing the decks in their buildings and empowering their teachers to focus on the important work of teaching."

—**Tim O'Leary**
Research Director, EDT
Lecturer, Melbourne Graduate School of Education
Parksville, Vic, Australia

"De-implementation is a core competency for any organization that focuses like a laser on only those high value initiatives that have real impact. DeWitt shows 'the why' behind implementation, and helps you map your own process and success criteria. If your leadership goal is to be more purposeful in where you focus your time, resources, and talent, *De-implementation* can help."

—**Colleen Kaney**
Assistant Superintendent, Hamburg Central School District
Hamburg, NY

"In *De-implementation: Creating the Space to Focus on What Works,* Peter M. DeWitt convincingly makes the case for getting serious about stopping or reducing (some) existing practices, and he provides no-nonsense tools to help you get this work done. It will help you to take the 'less-path', whilst also getting more done in the process!"

—Arran Hamilton
Group Education Director, Cognition Education, New Zealand
Author of *The Lean Education Manifesto* (Routledge) and
Building to Impact (Corwin)

"The pace and breadth of initiatives in schools seem to grow exponentially. *De-implementation* offers a much-needed sense of relief to step back and 'creates space to focus on what works.' The text reads like a conversation, offers a roadmap back to balance, and outlines a clear process and hands-on tools to support along the way."

—Chris Beals
Director, Washington Association of School Administrators
Instructional Leadership Network
Retired teacher, Building a District School Leader
Tumwater, WA

"My goal this year as a principal was to evaluate what we are doing in our building that is effective. As always, Peter M. DeWitt breaks down big ideas into immediate action steps that are simple. This book is timely for leaders in education because it is an opportunity to make evidence-based changes that focus on student learners and effective practices."

—Stacy Storey
Elementary Principal
Oklahoma City School District
Oklahoma City, OK

"After decades of adding on in public education, DeWitt's *De-implementation* guides readers through a thoughtful experience of reflection, wonder and questioning. He challenges decades of assumptions that more is better. Instead, he encourages more implementation of deep, important practices. Frankly, I will use the concept of 'clutter checks' for the rest of my career!

Like DeWitt says, 'It's now your turn!'"

—Michael Nelson
Retired Teacher, Building Leader Superintendent
2019 Washington state Superintendent of the Year
Assistant Executive Director at WASA
Enumclaw, WA

"A timely and necessary read, DeWitt challenges us teachers and leaders to look introspectively and consider what might we no longer need in education. The process of implementation should first look at what isn't serving our best interests and DeWitt provides a practical model to do so. All stakeholders who are responsible for initiatives and professional learning should read this book immediately. "

—Vince Bustamante
Author of *Great Teaching by Design* and *The Assessment Playbook for Distance and Blended Learning*
Edmonton AB, Canada

"Peter M. DeWitt has touched on a topic that so many school leaders have at times completely missed. *De-implementation* comes at a time when schools are being asked to take more on without considering what needs to be left behind. DeWitt's notion of de-implementation provides a platform for school communities to examine not just what they do but how and why they do it."

—Raymond Boyd
Principal, West Swan (Dayton) Primary School
West Swan, WA, Australia

"Due to the increased stress and complex issues currently compounding educational systems, there is no better time than now to read DeWitt's *De-implementation*. Filled with practical guidance, this book provides direction for educators to help navigate the de-implementation process. Specific steps are given for leaders and teachers to take together as they engage in critical conversations to understand the impact of their choices."

—Mandi Olson
Instructional Coach, Alpine School District
American Fork, UT

"Our current situation has created stressful challenges and uncertainties that could jeopardize our well-being as educators. Added expectations have shifted our attention away from our mission as educators—student learning. DeWitt provides a clear and evidence-based process to make us highly selective about what we bring into our schools."

—Caroline Picard
Former Assistant Superintendent for the Francophone School District, British Columbia, Canada
Education Consultant - Leadership & Coaching
Roberts Creek, BC, Canada

"De-implementation challenges schools to sharpen their focus and 'de-clutter' what has not made an impact by using a cycle of de-implementation. DeWitt offers practical examples and internal professional learning opportunities at the end of each chapter to help schools adopt a shared language for supporting improvement in their contexts."

—Helen Butler
CEO of Partners in Learning
Sunbury, Vic, Australia

"Peter M. DeWitt has a habit of leaping ahead avoiding tinkering and focusing on a substantial change agenda. Fortunately, he also insists on making the reader an action partner. There are five great ideas; and five stops along the way. Each time, you have a 'clutter check' where you clean up before you proceed. *De-implementation* is a book that helps you de-tox your change agenda, replacing it with a healthy streamlined focus on what really works."

—Michael Fullan
Professor Emeritus, Change Consultant and Author
Toronto, ON, Canada

De-implementation

De-implementation

Creating the Space to Focus on What Works

Peter M. DeWitt

Foreword by Andreas Schleicher

CORWIN

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Contents

Chapter 3: What Gets De-implemented (based on reflection and evidence) 45

Chapter 4: The Cycle of De-implementation (for big ideas around school change) 61

Foreword

We all know that without substantial change, the gap between what education systems provide and what our societies demand is likely to widen further. There is a risk that education becomes our next steel industry, and schools a relic of the past. But to transform schooling at scale, we need not just a radical, alternative vision of what is needed and what is possible, but also smarter strategies that help make change in education happen.

Educators face tough choices when evaluating policy alternatives; they need to weigh the potential impact against the economic and political cost of change. Should they pursue what is most technically feasible? What is most politically and socially feasible? What can be implemented quickly? What can be sustainable over a sufficient time horizon? Even where we have all the answers, the reality is that the road of educational reform is littered with many good ideas that were poorly implemented.

One reason for the difficulty in reforming education is simply the scale and reach of the sector. Another is the laws, regulations, structures, and institutions on which policymakers tend to focus. They are just the small visible tip of a huge iceberg. The reason why it is so hard to move education systems is that there is a much larger, invisible part under the waterline. This invisible part is composed of the interests, beliefs, motivations, and fears of the people who are involved. Policymakers are rarely successful with education reform unless they help people recognize what needs to change, and build a shared understanding and collective ownership for change.

The potential loss of advantages or privileged positions also plays a role in education because the vast structure of established providers means that there are extensive vested interests. As a result, the status quo has many protectors—stakeholders in education who stand to lose a degree of power or influence if changes are made. It is difficult

to ask the frogs to clear the swamp. Then there is often uncertainty about who will benefit from reforms and to what extent. Assessing the relative costs and benefits of reform in education is also difficult because of the large number of intervening factors that can influence the nature, size, and distribution of any improvements. The investment may be expensive over the long term, while in the short term it is rarely possible to predict clear, identifiable results from new policies, especially given the time lags between implementation and effect.

Timing is also relevant to education reform, and in more than one sense. Most significantly, there is a substantial gap between the time at which the initial cost of reform is incurred and the time when it is evident whether the benefits of reform will materialize. While timing complicates the politics of reform in many domains, it seems to have a greater impact on education reform, where the lags often involve many years. Policymakers may lose an election over education issues, but they rarely win an election because of education reform. That may also be why, across OECD countries, only about one in ten reforms is followed by any attempt to evaluate its impact.

But the elephant in the room is something else; it is the inability of education systems to unlearn and relearn when the context changes, which leads to students learning a mile wide but just an inch deep and educators getting entangled in complex administrative processes that nobody understands and takes real ownership of. I learned that lesson when designing the first PISA mathematics assessment. When studying national mathematics curricula for the development of our assessment as a starting point, I often asked myself why curricula devote as much attention to teaching things like trigonometry. When asking mathematicians, psychologists, and engineers, they determined that trigonometry was just one specific application of mathematics, was nowhere in the critical path of building conceptual understanding in mathematics, and that those skills had long been digitized and automated. Unfortunately, our school systems were unable to identify and get rid of things that became irrelevant.

This is where DeWitt's *De-implementation: Creating the Space to Focus on What Works* comes in. While numerous scholars have reviewed de-implementation processes, this is the most comprehensive and systematic attempt to understand de-implementation processes and to leverage this understanding to help educational practitioners

and policymakers pursue fewer things at greater depth and take to heart that we do not need to do everything differently to do some things better.

—Andreas Schleicher
Director for Education and Skills and
Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General
at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD), Paris

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank John Hattie and Arran Hamilton for engaging with me around this idea of de-implementation. The conversations have been very valuable.

No author writes a book alone, and I could not have written this one without the important and deep feedback offered by my editor, Tanya Ghans. As we know, it was kind of a rough time while I wrote this book, and you provided a light that kept me going. Thank you to Helen Butler, Stacy Storey, Tom Guskey, and Ray Boyd for the conversations on the topic of de-implementation, and for the friendship. And thank you to Andreas Schleicher for his important and impactful foreword.

During the writing of this book, I developed a partnership with Mike Nelson, Chris Beals, and Tom Murphy from the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA). Along with Jenni Donohoo as my co-lead advisor for our work with Directors of Teaching and Learning, we not only formed a great team but became friends as well. Thank you for all the conversations.

Last, to my family: I'm better because of all of you.

About the Author

Peter M. DeWitt, EdD is a former K–5 teacher (eleven years) and principal (eight years). He is a school leadership coach who runs competency-based workshops and provides keynotes nationally and internationally, focusing on school leadership (collaborative cultures and instructional leadership), as well as fostering inclusive school climates.

Additionally, Peter coaches school-based leaders, directors, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and school-based leadership teams both in person and remotely. In summer 2021 Peter created a yearlong on-demand asynchronous coaching course through Thinkific where he has fostered a community of learners that includes K–12 educators in leadership positions.

Peter's work has been adopted at the state and university level, and he works with numerous school districts, school boards, regional networks, and ministries of education around North America, Australia, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the UK.

Peter writes the "Finding Common Ground" column for *Education Week*, which has been in circulation since 2011. In 2020 Peter co-created *Education Week*'s "A Seat at the Table" series, where he moderates conversations with experts around the topics of race, gender, sexual orientation, research, trauma, and many other educational topics.

Additionally, Peter is the editor for the Connected Educator series (Corwin) and the Impact series (Corwin), which include books by Viviane Robinson, Andy Hargreaves, Pasi Sahlberg, Yong Zhao, and Michael Fullan. He is the 2013 School Administrators

Association of New York State's (SAANYS) Outstanding Educator of the Year and the 2015 Education Blogger of the Year (Academy of Education Arts & Sciences), and he sits on numerous advisory boards. Peter is the author, co-author, or contributor of numerous books, including the following:

- *Dignity for All: Safeguarding LGBT Students* (Corwin, 2012)

- *School Climate Change* (co-authored with Sean Slade; ASCD, 2014)

- *Flipping Leadership Doesn't Mean Reinventing the Wheel* (Corwin, 2014)

- *Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences That Matter Most* (Corwin/ Learning Forward, 2016)

- *School Climate: Leading With Collective Teacher Efficacy* (Corwin/ Ontario Principals Council, 2017)

- *Coach It Further: Using the Art of Coaching to Improve School Leadership* (Corwin, 2018)

- *Instructional Leadership: Creating Practice Out of Theory* (Corwin, 2020)

- *10 Mindframes for Leaders: The Visible Learning Approach to School Success* (edited by John Hattie and Ray Smith; Corwin, 2020)

- *Collective Leader Efficacy: Strengthening the Impact of Instructional Leadership Teams* (Corwin/Learning Forward, 2021)

Peter's articles have appeared in educational research journals at the state, national, and international level. His books have been translated into four languages.

Some of the organizations Peter has worked with are the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Arkansas State University, EDUTAS, University of Oklahoma, Victoria Department of Education (Australia), University of Rotterdam (Netherlands), Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA), the National Education Association (NEA), New Brunswick Teacher's Association (Canada), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), Education Scotland (Scotland), Glasgow City Council (Scotland), Kuwait Technical College (Kuwait), the National Association of School Psychologists, ASCD, l'Association des directions et directions adjointes

des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO), the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO), the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC), National School Climate Center, GLSEN, PBS, NPR, BAM Radio Network, ABC, and NBC's Education Nation.

To my mom, Gail DeWitt. 4/28/34—11/24/21

To Patricia (Trish) Choukeir. 5/2/64—3/31/22.
My sister. My protector. My best friend.
You always showed so much strength for all of us.

To Doug. Thanks for helping me breathe.

Introduction

Burn Out or Fade Away

We know that school leaders, as well as educators, students, and families around the world, have been through many challenges as a result of COVID-19. The reality is that those challenges have been daily, because of schedule changes, contact tracing, choosing from a disappearing list of substitute teachers to cover for a teacher out because of the virus, and a whole host of other crises that come up seemingly every hour.

Academic and social-emotional focus used to be for students, but over the past year, many schools have begun to understand that a balance between academics and social-emotional learning is for teachers and leaders too. There has been an increase in stress and anxiety, and it could have a devastating impact on our school communities if we do not change it. Leaders and teachers are burning out or in some cases fading away and leaving the profession.

This is not a new issue. This increase in stress and anxiety has been happening for the past couple of decades. In the United States, Levin et al. (2020) found that "42 percent of principals indicated they were considering leaving their position." According to the study, "Nationally, the average tenure of a principal is about four years, and nearly one in five principals, approximately 18 percent, turn over annually. Often the schools that need the most capable principals, those serving students from low-income families, have even greater principal turnover."

Queen and Schumacher (2006) found that "as many as 75 percent of principals experience stress-related symptoms that include fatigue, weakness, lack of energy, irritability, heartburn, headache, trouble sleeping, sexual dysfunction, and depression" (p. 18).

This is a worldwide issue. In fact, the *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey 2017 Data* shows that one in three

school principals are in serious distress and one in three principals have been exposed to physical violence (Riley, 2018).

Leaders are not alone in this crisis. Ninety-two percent of teachers in an *Education Week* study said they were more stressed out in fall 2021 than they were in fall 2020, before we had a vaccine.

The annual Teacher Wellbeing Index, which is published in the United Kingdom, found that 77 percent of teachers surveyed in 2021 experienced symptoms of poor mental health due to their work, and 54 percent of teachers surveyed considered leaving the sector in the past two years due to pressures on their mental health (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2022).

Even though we know these statistics, many school districts reply, "Yeah, but . . ." Yeah, we know people are burned out, but we must keep moving forward. This is not only ridiculous; it is negatively impacting the personal and professional lives of practitioners who have worked really hard to get there. We can't talk about mental health and do nothing to help alleviate the issues impacting mental health.

One of the biggest factors in educators' stress levels is the breadth of tasks they are juggling. Educators, like the rest of us, often chase shiny new ideas they may in fact not need. We must get off the hamster wheel of new initiatives to really understand whether what we are presently doing is working, and that is where de-implementation enters the equation.

Sharpening Our Focus by Working Together

Our focus in school should always be on student learning and the impact of teachers and leaders, as well as the students themselves, on that learning. That's a given. But which strategies will best help us have a deeper impact on student learning? Are they the practices we have been engaging in for a long time, or are they the fresher ideas we brainstormed together? Understanding what best impacts student learning requires adults within the school to learn from one another as well. Hattie and Yates (2014) say, "Human learning is a slow process that can happen over months and years rather than hours and days" (p. 113).

Hattie and Yates (2014) go on to say that for that learning to take place, "the necessary ingredients are (a) time, (b) goal-orientation, (c) supportive feedback, (d) accumulated successful practice, and (d) frequent review" (p. 113).

What does that have to do with de-implementation? Quite simply: everything. Teachers, staff, and school leaders need to spend time engaging in discussions about what practices successfully help impact student learning, and carefully decide which practices, on the part of both students and adults, need to stay and which ones need to go. Just to be clear, de-implementation is not about limiting the number of strategies we try in our classrooms and schools, but it is about knowing when to get rid of or replace the ones that aren't working.

Where It All Began

In early spring 2021, I was having separate conversations with Arran Hamilton from Cognition Education, based in New Zealand, and John Hattie from the University of Melbourne in Australia. They were partnering on some work involving de-implementation. Hattie sent me the medical field research on de-implementation, which began a few short years ago, and we began emailing back and forth because he suggested that I explore it too. During a rabbit-hole moment, where I found myself clicking on citations of citations of citations, I found research from the field of school psychology.

What I found out is the process of de-implementation is not new. In 1990, Drucker wrote, "The first policy—and the foundation for all the others—is to abandon yesterday. The first need is to free resources from being committed to maintaining what no longer contributes to performance and no longer produces results. In fact, it is not possible to create tomorrow unless one first sloughs off yesterday" (Drucker, 2018, p. 1).

Drucker went on to write, "Planned, purposeful abandonment of the old and of the unrewarding is a prerequisite to successful pursuit of the new and highly promising" (p. 2).

The goal of this book is to take the readers back to "that planned, purposeful abandonment," also referred to as de-implementation. Through slowing down and carefully curating the tools they use, schools can find their way back to balance.

How This Book Works

Within this book, I share the roots of the de-implementation research and how I have adapted it to fit educators' needs. These adaptations make the process of de-implementation less complex and easier to engage in as an individual or team. Each chapter includes real-life scenarios, "clutter checks" that provide a moment for you to pause and think about your

current practices, activities, support for roadblocks, a bit of psychology to peer into how our minds help or hinder de-implementation, and tools or guiding questions to help you rally your focus around what works for your school community. This book will also signal where the process of de-implementing can be quick and when it will need to be more formal (see Chapter 4).

This book is based on some assumptions:

- Schools are places of learning, not just for students but for adults as well.

- Too often, the initiatives schools adopt arise from the ideas of a few instead of the collaborative thinking of many.

- The workload of teachers, staff, and leaders has increased over the past two decades, and it is time to partially reduce or replace some of the actions they take, for their mental health and well-being.

- To have a true impact on student and adult learning, schools need an intentional process to understand what is working and what is not.

- There are school leaders in this world who will give teachers and leaders permission to do this work.

I want you to really engage with this text. Highlight it, mark it up, add your epiphanies, and most important, work with your team. A key premise of this work is that it can be successful only if key members of the community have a say in the decision-making process.

Last, the focus should always be how de-implementation will lead to a greater impact on student learning. I believe that de-implementation is a concept school leaders and teachers must explore. Make no mistake though: this process is all about professional learning. When your team—however many people make up that team—engages in the de-implementation process, it is meant to be an impactful form of professional learning.

Le Fevre et al. (2019, pp. 7–8) suggest that there are six important roots to facilitating professional learning:

1. Adopting an evaluative inquiry stance—De-implementation is based in inquiry and evaluation.

2. Valuing and using deep conceptual knowledge—This book asks you to position yourself as a learner and look at the bigger picture of how, within all of what you do, you impact student learning.
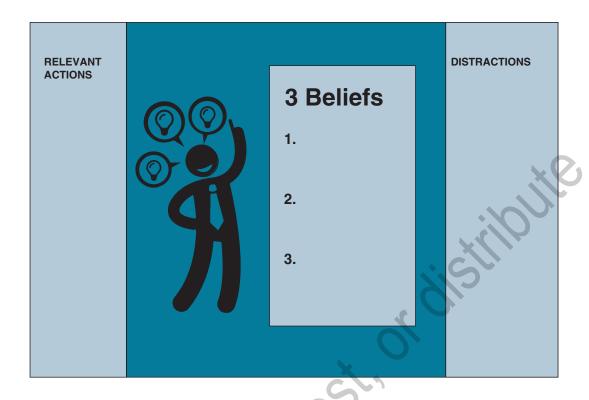
3. Being agentic—It is important that every person who does this work feels a sense of agency to use their most authentic voices.

4. Being aware of cultural positioning—Le Fevre et al. (2019) say that "cultural positioning is about the way people experience the world through specific cultural lenses" (p. 25).

5. Being metacognitive—All of you must have a deep understanding about your own level of thinking and reasoning.

6. Bringing a systemic focus—No matter how small you start with the de-implementation process, you must see how it will help improve the greater system you teach and lead in.

So before you continue reading the book, I'm asking that you engage in your first activity, which is about your beliefs when it comes to student learning and school. Brandt and Sleegers (2021) define an individual's belief system as "a network of causally connected attitudes and identities" (p. 159). Below, you will need to consider your beliefs about student learning. The following are the steps I want you to take for this activity:

Regardless of whether you are engaging in this book as a partnership or group, I would like you to first fill it out by yourself.

1. Write down three beliefs you have about learning, students, or education. These are three beliefs that you would defend to anyone.

2. If you are working with a partner or team, share your three beliefs. During the process of sharing beliefs, be willing to question the beliefs of others and be open to having them question your beliefs.

3. Take time to write down the relevant actions you engage in that ultimately assist you in your three beliefs. Many times, people won't write down management-type activities because they don't think those can be relevant to achieving their beliefs, but I think some management techniques do help us achieve our beliefs.

4. Take time to write down the distractions that may prevent you from achieving those beliefs.

As you engage with this book, I want you to come back to your beliefs, as well as the relevant actions and distractions, with your team. During the time you read this book and engage in the activities, take time to notice whether any of your beliefs evolve or change.

RELEVANT ACTIONS		DISTRACTIONS
	3 Beliefs 1. 2. 3.	

My purpose is to set the precedent at the beginning that I really want this process to be well thought out and human. Engaging in conversations with one another around an idea can lead to some of our best professional development. Books should never be part of a process done to you but should be part of a process done with you that includes your voice.

Peter M. DeWitt, EdD

What Are Educators Interested in De-implementing?

In a survey of educators and school leaders from all parts of the world, the following are some of the areas they said they would like to de-implement in one way, shape, or form. Some of the ideas are followed by quotations from the survey.

Meetings—This is by far the most popular area for people to begin. They have a meeting to establish the agenda for another meeting, and then they have a meeting after the meeting to discuss it all!

Email—Educators are burned out when it comes to checking email. Although you won't have to go through a cycle of de-implementation to minimize how often people check email, it is an area that comes up a lot in workshops and coaching.

Drive-by professional development—Teachers, school psychologists, counselors, and leaders are minimizing the time they spend in one-time professional development and instead are engaging in community-of-learners practice that evolves over a number of months or years.

Top-down professional development—Educators would like to replace top-down district-run professional development with professional learning that is based on the needs of teachers and students!

PowerPoint—"Replace PowerPoint lessons with thinking routines and inquiry learning. Students can engage in deeper learning through self-discovery and research than when fed content from a PowerPoint."

In-school-only learning—For many reasons, including what we discovered during COVID-19, teachers and leaders understand that students learn outside the classroom as much as, if not more than, they learn in the classroom. Those teachers and leaders have replaced an in-school-learning-only mindset with one that understands a great deal of learning takes place in a social context within and outside of school.

Teacher talk—"Too much teacher talk—replace with engaging student talk; the person talking is doing the learning."

Zero tolerance policies—This form of discipline has been seen to be not only harmful but also discriminatory.

Homework—Educators are de-implementing homework in a variety of ways, meaning that they are trying to partially reduce the amount of homework they give to students, or replacing their usual homework with the opportunity for students to engage in passion projects.

Child Study Team (CST) process—Teams want to replace the deficit mindset that often comes with this process with one that focuses on strengths as well as weaknesses.

Special education practices—Schools want to replace special education with a more human and strengths-based process to maximize the opportunities for students with exceptionalities.

Biased or one-sided historical content—The year 2021 was unprecedented when it came to backlash against teaching a more diverse and realistic history. De-implementation in this area means making sure that our historical content in school focuses on a more well-balanced approach and an unabashedly true depiction of history.