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MINDSHIFT #1: LEADING WITH A CRISIS MINDSET

> Close scrutiny will show that most of these everyday so-called "crisis situations" are not life or death matters at all, but opportunities to advance, or stay where you are.
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> —Maxwell Maltz (1976)

Outside Story: Unconventional Decisions

On the surface it seems like Zappos is just another shoe and clothing distribution company. That's what they do, but it's not who they are. If you take a moment to learn about the company, you'll realize that they are completely consumer-focused. A real Zappos super-fan knows that they're essentially a warehouse company committed to being an elite customer service provider—handling inventory and customer satisfaction at a superior level.

Zappos' success didn't come easily. There was a time when the company outsourced their warehouse and storage facilities. This made it difficult to accurately assess their inventory or

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delivery time—two nightmares for a company dependent on speed of delivery and consumer relationships. While other businesses might have focused on trying to perfect outsourcing to save money, Zappos moved to owning and operating their own warehouses. While other companies may have sunk more money into services that customers enjoyed, Zappos shifted their entire operation to support its call center and the staffing needs for phone reps.

We selected Zappos' to spark your thinking because they did three things that most organizations fail to do. One, they didn't see their current strategy as the only path to success, refusing to continue dumping money and resources into a failing strategy. They pivoted, fast and hard. Two, they understood the implications of change, both the positive and the potentially negative. It's not easy to pick a new place for your company to call home, yet, that's what they did a couple times. Once they moved to Kentucky next to the UPS World-Port to open a fulfillment center, and then they moved to Henderson, Nevada, to solve their call center issues. Knowing that many employees might not be willing to make the trek with them, they made the tough decision to move to an area that would support the growth and vision of the company. Three, they confronted the crisis with new and different thinking to measure success. While other companies rely on metrics like how long a representative will be on the phone with someone, Zappos ignores traditional metrics and focuses on customer satisfaction through incredible customer service.

Zappos abandoned traditional thinking and conventional wisdom to lead with a crisis mindset with the following:

1. When something isn't working, pivot fast and hard.

2. Radical change is a tough decision, do it anyway.

3. Confront the crisis with new thinking, abandon traditional measures.

Flawed Thinking: The Lost Opportunities

There are two prevailing issues with how we work to solve problems in education. One, our solutions conform to our current school system, which imposes limitations. In fact, it can actually prevent our brains from seeing breakthroughs and opportunities. We call this *Dimmed Lights*. Two, our approach to solving problems usually is in the form of altering instruction, using programs, and increasing our professional prowess. Yet, we rarely take the necessary time to really learn the initiative, allow it to affect change, and implement it with fidelity. We call this the *Starting Block Syndrome*. Let's unpack the reasons for both.

THE DIMMED LIGHTS PHENOMENON

Our brains do a tremendous job, completely involuntary, on spotlighting and dimming certain areas of interest as well as filtering out other irrelevant data. This filtration process is phenomenal as the brain deletes, dismisses, and dims things that are immaterial so that it can illuminate those areas that are relevant and critical. Consider how important this function is in our daily lives. Routine skills, like driving a car, are made possible through our ability to focus on the road and the other cars as we drive on a highway all the while eliminating the unnecessary distractions that would otherwise capture our attention. We may notice a billboard or beautiful tree, but it passes by as we center on those more important specifics, such as a stoplight or a pedestrian.

Whether driving a car or teaching in a classroom, our senses—touch, smell, taste, hearing, and sight—are bombarded with an inordinate amount of information. We function on our brain's ability to perform its task of zooming in on some items and clouding out others. It's fascinating how much new information is being gathered about the brain as new technologies in the field of neuroscience are emerging. Recent advances have revealed that the brain functions differently

than we originally believed. What was once thought to be true about how the brain focuses on particular features of our world is actually the opposite. Instead, the brain is remarkably good at dulling what is deemed as nonessential. What we now know is that "the brain wasn't brightening the light on stimuli of interest; it was lowering the lights on everything else" (Cepelewicz, 2019).

This is a profound discovery when we think about what to focus on to improve our schools and how. Since, we naturally dim the light on the areas that we don't perceive as vital, the conclusions we draw about school improvement, whether a literacy initiative or parental involvement, are dependent on our brain's natural ability to isolate and obscure other information. Looking at this through an educational leadership lens, we see how this phenomenon plays out. The lights are simply being lowered in certain areas within classrooms, schools, and districts, potentially making it difficult to see possibilities of unique change and unconventional decisions that lie beyond our central focus. This is not done intentionally, actually quite the opposite. Schools are built and designed to grow learners within a prescribed construct that is intended for a large body of students. The general process of schooling is to take preidentified information and skills that are aligned to a set of standards and transform them into practical classroom instruction. This is precisely how we miss opportunities.

At the earliest levels of education, students learn integral skills, such as reading, so that they can eventually use the skill of reading to learn. The system is built to equip students to learn key information, develop skills to use that information, and then expand those skills to extend their own thinking. The major challenge in this process is that the structures for learning and the educational system itself is complex, making change slow and arduous. The system doesn't naturally shift when we encounter struggling students, adverse challenges, and seemingly insurmountable situations that lie beyond the established norm and traditional construct. When students are

struggling with concepts, ideas, and skills, or even with behaving and cooperating with others, we don't look at altering the system, but rather we work to infuse support and services within the predesigned system to assist the child.

As such, the process for learning doesn't change; rather, we simply add to it. This can come in the form of programs, extra time, extra help, specifically designed instruction, etc. You name it, schools have done it. All these additions help to support student improvement to some degree, but they are designed to help the student within the provided school construct, which, in and of itself, may be the limiting factor. We don't abandon the mold; we simply work within it. We rarely arrive at the essential question: what if the mold is wrong for the student? In the case where the answer is "yes," all of the structures and supports that we add will only have a minimal positive effect because they are designed within an inflexible predetermined framework.

This is not to suggest that educators aren't fully committed to student improvement or that we should abandon our way of schooling altogether. Rather, we must recognize how our system of schooling imposes limitations and contributes to how we view problems. Our perception may be obscured by how we naturally focus on some things and not others. It means that we need to quit thinking within the proverbial box or in this case the schoolhouse to solve ailing issues.

It also reveals that providing an education to every child is arguably more challenging than ever. Given the complexities of our society and the diverse needs of every community, the educational system has to become far more elastic in nature. Schools strive to not only provide rigorous instruction but also seamlessly create a responsive classroom designed to assess student needs for greater academic progress. But altering modes of instruction to best meet the needs of every student in real time within the current construct of the system is notably impossible. It's just that, impossible, and to be

candid, doing what we've always done isn't going to get us to what can be possible.

The issues become most prominent when students' needs fall outside and beyond that of the traditional track designed within the system. Unfortunately, the constraints within the system may be the barrier to the students' development and growth. The educational system, something we refer to as the educational industrial complex in Chapter 2, can be so rigid that it prevents alternative paths for student learning, who don't follow the normal course of grade-level age-determined standards. To work around this reality, schools often use tools and programs that they believe can work within the system and also increase student achievement. However, this strategy is riddled with its own issues.

THE STARTING BLOCK SYNDROME

To understand this further, consider the sport of track and field. One of the most important tools for a track and field runner is the starting blocks. Exceptional sprinters use the blocks to their advantage and practice extensively on how to come out of the blocks appropriately. Great sprinters' performance is highly correlated with their start time (Bezodis, Willwacher, & Salo, 2019). However, the blocks alone are not what makes the sprinter faster, but it is the effective use of the blocks and the sprinter's reaction time as the gun sounds.

In 2021, the fastest man on the planet is Usain Bolt with a remarkable 100-meter time of 9.58 seconds (Nag, 2020). However, in the 2017 world championship in London, Bolt finished third. Although he covered the ground faster than anyone else on the track, his starting block time was milliseconds slower than Justin Goleman and Christian Catlin (The Speed Project, 2021). The blocks can serve as a major advantage or disadvantage. There is no doubt that they help, but the proper use of them is critical whether you are an elite world-class sprinter or a competitive high school athlete. What is designed to help and offer support needs to also be mastered to become effective in its use. In fact, introducing a

young or inexperienced runner to the blocks too soon could do more harm than good.

In similar fashion, schools implement tools and strategies that could prove to be highly effective, but without adequate time to learn and master them or modify the setting, we miss the opportunity to fully experience their power. We refer to this as the starting block syndrome because although these tools and strategies may yield results, they certainly won't do so if they're not used effectively. For example, teachers often find themselves with a new reading series, or a new math program, or even professional learning on high leverage instruction that they must fit into their day. Coupling this with our natural focus to work within our prescribed daily timeframe, we naturally dim or cancel out other problems. The tool or strategy becomes the primary focus and is viewed as the solution. Again, it's the proper use of the starting blocks—new tools and strategies—not the blocks alone. We've learned throughout COVID-19, and other crises, that with the proper mindset, we won't stop adjusting our approach, and we can continue to tweak the use of a strategy until we achieve our goals.

This common method of adding tools and strategies to fix issues fails to provide the necessary support to fully develop the teachers' knowledge and skills to meet the students' needs. It only results in another weak attempt to resolve a difficult problem, and we find ourselves on a treadmill of strategy-based adjustments in the use of tools and new tricks that end up falling short. If the training for these modifications remains at an introductory level, we can expect that teachers will lack the differentiated professional learning that is needed to cultivate expertise. This is not a teacher problem, but it's a system problem. If teachers get the blocks, but they can't push from them the way that's needed, the blocks are not helpful. The strategy ends up being absorbed into the classroom and used as a support mechanism. It becomes a treatment for the problem, not a real solution. Ultimately, the one-size-fits-all training and the program-based method of

adding more to the already complicated and overworked system produces limited results with increased frustration.

The question then becomes how can we break free from this cycle of identifying a problem, providing limited treatment by adding to the already overflowing workload, and expecting improved results, only to see minor improvements if any? The answer begins with our ability to embrace a crisis mindset in schools. Each decision that we believe will improve outcomes that must be governed by key strategies and driven by a set of central activities. We can't continue to add programs or implement initiatives that lack the professional training needed for them to be successful or that simply heap more onto our educators as the single variable in a very complex formula.

And, the magnitude of the effort must mirror the size of the crisis itself. Hoping that the new curriculum will solve our equity and access issues is an empty promise at best. Lastly, to shift our approach and completely alter our mindset for solving perennial problems, we must first confront our own relationship with what we have for so long deemed as insurmountable challenges within the system.

The New Mindshift: Leading With a Crisis Mindset

By continuing to use the same common approaches to our persistent problems, we fail to see the unique approaches necessary to make a difference. The problems are persistent and the tools and strategies that we're using to solve them haven't changed. Unfortunately, the very institutions that are charged with teaching students to use creativity aren't using a creative approach to its own issues. We've dulled the wrong sensory inputs. We hate to say it, but we've become comfortably numb.

Leading with a Crisis Mindset means responding with immediacy and urgency to old and ailing issues that would otherwise continue to be the Achilles heel of learning, progress, and new paths to success in schools.

To break free from the traditional approach of solving problems requires what we describe as a crisis mindset. A shift to a new mindset for solving problems and creating systemic solutions: *an unfiltered 360° view and approach to solving problems with urgency that abandons conventional wisdom and accepts restraints until a meaningful solution is found, implemented, and sustained*. It is an attitude about problems that includes a no-turning-back approach. Leading with a Crisis Mindset means responding with immediacy and urgency to old and ailing issues that would otherwise continue to be the Achilles' heel of learning, progress, and new paths to success in schools.

There are three primary reasons for why this has occurred in education, probably true for other failing industries as well. The first is that the system is immovable, stuck in its ways, and heavily bureaucratic. The paths to real and continued success aren't clear enough for all stakeholders to agree on and pursue. Granted, some schools and systems have developed an out-of-the-box means for experiencing success, but too often these means aren't scalable and dissolve with turnover. It's time to move past what we know, beyond traditional approaches, and onto new ways of thinking about these old problems. The second is that we don't spend enough time thinking about our relationship with internal problems. Why aren't we able to see past the problem itself? Without this type of metacognition, we're doomed to a loop of poor self-efficacy and fear that we can't solve problems or that change is unsafe and feels wrong. The lack of comfort can be disturbing if we're truly forging a new path. And third, we haven't confronted our crises as such and that means that we won't initiate the urgency and resolve needed for change. As

Fullan stated (1993), "the insurmountable problem is juxtaposing a continuous change theme with a continuous conservative system that defies change. In partnership with all community agencies, educators must initiate the creation of learning societies as part of a larger social agenda."

This agenda not only needs to be fully inclusive of several key stakeholders, but it must also face perennial problems with a brave new approach, a crisis mindset, to forever move the needle of performance in schools.

PROBLEM-SOLVING, CREATIVITY, AND NEW PATHS TO SUCCESS

The ingenuity in our ability to solve problems stems from our willingness and devotion to uncovering new paths to success. But it's not natural for our brains to search for new and uncomfortable routines. In fact, when we are forced to solve issues that lie outside of our typical setting, we must rely on a unique and innovative resolve that not everyone has or that we don't commonly employ. As Gopnik (2011) puts it, "as we get older our brains 'prune out' the weaker, less used pathways and strengthen the ones that are used most often." This is particularly challenging when we need to rely on "imagination" and "creativity" to solve complex issues that require "out of the box" divergent thinking. Because the problems require new and creative thinking is, in part, a problem itself. Routines and established processes won't change without a mindshift.

In March of 2020, schools faced an unprecedented and unpredictable predicament. With almost no warning, the institutions where learning takes place—including colleges and universities, preschool programs, and K–12 systems—were considered fertile environments for the spread of a deadly virus. Schools closed for what was meant to be a short two-week break but what turned into a situation without any clarity or end in sight. School systems were forced to find ways to educate children beyond the school. The challenges were endless, and the solutions weren't readily available. Kitchen

tables became virtual learning spaces. Teachers' technological skills were accelerated by necessity. Schools didn't just need 1:1 devices for students, but also they needed to ensure at-home connectivity.

Educators were forced to embrace a different approach to problem-solving. Teachers surprised themselves by doing whatever it took to reach and teach children effectively in a very unfamiliar (understatement) environment. There was a benefit to this shift in thinking because it resulted in a shift in strategies for finding solutions to problems that had been ineffectively tackled for years.

Educators and other professions, who were suddenly thrust into a new and different reality than ever before, were obligated to change in order to continue. Some quit shortly after coming to a realization that they weren't equipped for the changes that needed to be made. Others learned to cope with the speed at which they needed to learn new ways of engaging students. Some, because of years of investing in themselves with new technologies and updated practices, were able to seamlessly integrate all of the newness, even helping others as they could.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CRISES

To understand a crisis mindset conceptually, we must first analyze our relationship and innate human tendencies when it comes to crises. First, our responses to challenging issues often commensurate with our belief in ourselves and the systems in which we work. This is similar to how Dweck (2015) describes our responses to certain situations in terms of the limitations we place on our abilities due to a *fixed mindset*. Whether we realize it or not, our ability to successfully face and solve a problem is limited and thwarted before we ever begin to solve it. Our mindset is the prohibitive factor in being creative about new solutions because it guides our approach.

Second, people like to feel safe. Psychological safety is the topic of a number of new studies regarding how people can

become more vulnerable at work to be able to contribute more in an environment that accepts failure (Brown, 2015). But, there's a problem when psychological safety is a delusion. In the case of perennial problems, feeling safe to continue doing as we've always done without applying new ideas and solutions is fake. It's a false impression. Our action creates safety when it shouldn't. This is how our relationship with crises fails us from the start. Because we are so desperate for a feeling of safety, we create it even when it doesn't exist.

In this regard, our relationship with crises—our self-efficacy about solving problems and our frantic need for safety—forestalls progress. If we truly believe an issue cannot be solved, perhaps only managed, then we will never find a resolution. Our focus is misplaced. Our brain's natural course of action will not be solution-driven but rather control-driven. This is why understanding how we perceive and respond to a crisis is imperative. The common approaches and efforts, despite their lack of success, will continue. There's more safety in continuing what doesn't work than admitting that we've had it all wrong, that something, more than likely drastic, needs to change. Efforts will push forward, and the status quo will remain. A concessional belief that "it's better than not doing anything" will prevail.

For educators to evaluate whether or not we can handle and solve certain problems is the first step in determining our path forward. This has been confused in the past—mostly by politicians and theorists—as a lack of will or a lack of skill, which we have found to be incorrect. This is why under-standing our relationship with crises is imperative. We have to metacognitively gauge whether or not the reasons we accept the status quo are due to the limits of our self- and collective efficacy, whether it's our need for safety, and if we can push past both toward something new. In coming to terms with our relationship with crises, we can see crises for what they are, not some insurmountable problems, rather prob-lems that we need more help solving. We're reminded of the chronic conditions for failure in that it's okay to admit that

we can't solve a problem in education as long as we're willing to recruit other institutions for help.

In *Becoming Bulletproof* (2020), Eva Poumpouras tells readers how fear can limit our ability to live a full life, prevent us from pursuing our goals, and, at its worst, rob us from the joy of day-to-day living. This is the essence of our relationship with crises and the reason why education is numbed by the fear of admitting that we aren't doing what is best for every student. We aren't. What comes next is the important part—the mindshift to leading with a crisis mindset.

CONFRONTING A CRISIS

Consider how often we establish a goal to increase English Language Arts (ELA) and Math student achievement scores. We institute clear and identifiable metrics, how much the aggregate and disaggregate need to improve, and we even have a clear knowledge of the gap in performance among subgroups. Even with all of this clarity and meaningful data, this approach will more likely yield little success. Embracing the crisis and its magnitude is the first step to confronting it and solving the problem, not goal-setting and strategic planning. Identifying the needs of the students within the context of learning is the key to improving outcomes; setting goals based on a test score is not the same as educating every child.

Regardless as to whether we're talking about No Child Left Behind or Every Student Succeeds Act, effective school leaders quickly realize that the test scores neglect to tell the real story about many of the fundamental needs of our students. Most students who need test score improvements have other more demanding requirements before we can apply an after-school tutoring program, for example. This is why confronting the crisis first, before setting the test score goals, is so critical. Even answering the question: "what's the crisis?" with "test scores" is only half true. If we don't know what the problem is, we can't fix it.

As Garvin (1993) stated, "In the absence of learning, companies—and individuals—simply repeat old practices. Change remains cosmetic, and improvements are either fortuitous or short-lived." In the case of education, change efforts are primarily about what and how to teach. In recent years, we've made strides toward a clearer picture about neuroscience and how the brain functions to learn, but we're still unlocking the use of social and emotional learning strategies to truly get at the heart of who students are and how we can help them to carve their own educational journey. It's their sense of self at school that might matter more than the schooling they receive.

This is what we mean by confronting the crisis, unraveling the problem before naming solutions and setting goals. The whole idea is to immerse ourselves in the information we have and then begin to develop answers to new questions without any of the traditional limiting constraints. Let's use graduation requirements as one of those constraints. Because students need four years of ELA, we will often enroll students in ninth-grade English, all at some level, to ensure that they obtain the credit. However, what if the ninth-grade student reads at a seventh-grade level? Our response is to provide additional help—after-school programs, perhaps a reading specialist to work with the teacher, maybe a more sophisticated program to help differentiate reading levels. All are noble. Some may come with a degree of success. But, the issue remains that they don't directly attack the problem. The crisis persists and the next student comes along, reading at a sixth-grade level. The system is a mouse on a wheel, unable to slow down for long enough to step off and truly evaluate if the wheel is even going anywhere. Instead, we stick to what we know, we crave safety in what we do, and we cloud our vision from the crises that are in our presence each day.

In reading this book, we hope to change your mind, shift your thinking, and help you to see the crises we have in education, perennial problems that aren't going anywhere unless we learn to lead with a new mindset. We know that we can help

you with a different framework for approaching problems; we also know that we can't solve them for you. This isn't a solution book, and you need to know that moving forward. It's a problem-solving guide for your most difficult issues in education. The only people who can solve a school's problems are the people who work there and the community in which the school resides. With all of the professional development that we, as consultants, provide for schools and districts each year, we know one thing: it's what they do when we leave that matters most. So, you're probably asking yourself this important question: How do we distinguish problems as crises from other emergent issues that leaders need to address? We have a model for that.

MODEL: IMPORTANT, URGENT, AND PERSISTENT

Schools are plagued by everyday issues, challenges, and nuisances. On any given day, something new surfaces, from a school bus fender bender to students getting back late from a field trip. Given the nature of schools, the amount of people they serve, and their working inner parts, these situations range from the trivial and inconsequential to prominent and dangerous. Since not every situation requires the same degree of action and resources, it is a fundamental skill of school leadership in education to know the difference between a real crisis and another ephemeral complication. We often argue that there should be a class at the graduate level called Firefighter 101: Discerning the Daily Dilemmas from the Consistent Crises in Education. We even tell leaders to ask two questions whenever anything new pops up: Does this need to be solved now? And, does it need to be solved by me?

We like to turn to Covey's quadrants (1989) because they teach us that to effectively manage ourselves and our work, we must focus on the items that are of the utmost importance and that will help us obtain the greatest results. He cautions leaders that we have to be mindful not to fall into the trap of getting caught in a cycle of only working on and solving "urgent" issues that arise throughout the day that prevent us

from working on our most "important" areas. That would be the central theme of the Firefighter course, discerning urgent versus important.

> *It is a vital skill to be able to distinguish the difference between something that is an actual crisis and something that is not.*

We subscribe to this philosophy and broaden it, though, to the perennial problems that need extensive focus, collaboration, resources, time, and urgency. Due to the nature of some of our most pressing issues in education, we've almost become numb to how urgent the need is to solve them. As a result, it is a vital skill to be able to distinguish the difference between something that is an actual crisis and something that is not. To do so, we use a simple model that has three basic criteria, shown in Figure 1.1, to determine if an issue is in fact a crisis and should then be dealt with accordingly.

1.1 Model: Important, Urgent, and Persistent

Important

The first criterion determines if the problem is important. One way to determine the importance of an issue is the extent to which it affects student and staff success within the realm of teaching and learning. There are many things throughout the day that are important, but measuring something through the lens of whether or not we are able to achieve our goals is the fulcrum for determining an issue's legitimacy. Schools endorse the power of technology and how it can transform a classroom, but having a highly skilled teacher in front of students is more important than any technological improvement we might make. Therefore, a school leader should exert greater focus, time, and energy finding creative ways to recruit a deeper applicant pool than securing laptops for the 1:1 initiative. This is where diversifying our staff is a crisis and getting a computer in the hands of every student is not. Students can learn without the device; but they can't without the teacher.

Urgent

The second criterion is whether or not the issue is urgent. Urgency is tricky because a juice spill in the hallway can be very urgent if students are in the halls, passing from one class to the other and we're worried that someone might fall. Viewing urgency through a crisis mindset requires us to focus not only on how something should be solved but also who is responsible (Sullivan & Hardy, 2020). A spill in the hallway should not demand the attention of an administrator beyond ensuring that it is being attended to. Don't misunderstand our focus. An all-hands-on-deck approach to running a successful school is needed. But, if an administrator is continually putting out little fires throughout the day, the key drivers of student achievement are not the focus, and the administrator's schedule will only go up in flames.

Persistent

The third criterion is whether or not the issue is persistent. Many urgent and important issues are isolated. They can be

solved with a few key decisions and don't have a rippling effect, impacting the function of other aspects of schooling. Throughout this book, we will discuss the mindshifts needed to solve issues along with the right approach to dealing with them. Being perceptive to the depth and breadth of a problem is a skill. Persistent problems are not easily solved, but if our focus is toward the root cause, not the symptom, we stand a chance. Going back to our need for highly skilled teachers, finding creative ways to advertise is a great start, but retaining teachers is one of the most strategic ways to address the teacher shortage problem (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). That's one of the primary differences with this new mindshift about recurring problems. In the case that you learn to tell your school's story better to attract new staff, but you can't retain them, the problem persists.

Understanding the crisis mindset model is crucial to begin underscoring the areas of focus for any school to start making serious gains with student achievement. To help teams use the model, we created a Crisis Filter Table so that you can determine where your school will place its attention this year.

Applying a Crisis Mindset to Grade-Level Readiness

This unfortunate reality in many of our schools of students moving from grade level to grade level without developing the appropriate grade-level skills is a crisis. Whether reading comprehension, mathematical computation, scientific pro-cesses or a myriad of other competencies, some students cannot not learn at the required pace in a particular setting. We argue that this is an issue that meets all three of our crisis criteria and does not have an easy solution. Schools struggle with the varying degree of students' ability levels and how to best meet their diverse needs. All the while the school cal-endar continues to move forward with marking periods

beginning and ending and with some students meeting the necessary benchmarks while others fall farther from the pack.

Much of this problem lies at the intersection of time, learning pace, and the scale of the problem in some schools. Although the challenges are numerous, we often look to solve the problems in the context of the classroom period or the typical school day and we may not even see the lost opportunities due to our approach and the way we work to handle the issues.

MAKING THE CONNECTION: GRADE-LEVEL READINESS IN SCHOOLS

As we referenced previously, a lot of students show up to ninth grade and aren't ready to experience the ninth-grade curriculum because of their reading levels. The same is true in sixth grade and fourth grade and every grade level before, thereafter, and in between. It's a perfect example to demonstrate the need for a change and how we've dimmed the light on the problem. Instead, we package similar efforts with different wrapping and hope for better results. We move the system forward regardless of the crises at hand. The path that we've used is so worn that it's the only one to follow. The one we know how.

To make the problem worse, we design a solution that adds to the already overburdened system rather than that changes it. We implement new programs and add time to the students' day when programs and time weren't necessarily getting to the core of what they needed. We can fall into the trap of spending more time on solutions than we do on our analysis of the problem, risking some of our efforts being misguided. It's easy to get stuck in the ways that we've always tackled grade-level readiness by not reflecting on our relationship with it as a problem, a crisis that must be solved.

Unfortunately, we don't have the answers to your grade-level reading problem. There are strategies, programs, and intensive data reviews that can be implemented, but literacy is a crisis that needs a global community effort. It's not just a

school issue, but it's a societal issue. Consider schools that have a mobile student population. The number of students who started in the school in kindergarten may be significantly different by the third grade. So the question may be how well do we acclimate new students and parents to the school? How well do we determine their skill levels on day one? Are we able to determine student support in the first week or do we wait to see how they perform? Many of the problems we pose in this book have solutions that you can find with a bit of research, like that of grading that we'll point out in Chapter 2. Grade-level reading is not the case because each school is different. What we do know is that if you're simply adding to the regular school day, especially in ways in which teachers aren't fully trained to implement, the problem isn't being treated with a sustainable plan. We're not getting to the root cause. It could very well be the curriculum. It could be something else, but grade-level reading should be added to your crisis filter, and with three checks, you'll see that it's time to attack it with a mindshift.

Technical Tip: The Crisis Filter

Successful school leadership teams (SLTs) understand and utilize the process of strategic planning to focus on the most critical areas that lead to the greatest results. Although this is a common activity, too often these plans are narrowly aligned to student achievement results (Bernhardt, 1998). These data are an important metric and because it is quantifiable, it is easier to set clear targets. A deeper look can reveal other conditions and situations directly linked to student achievement.

The table in Figure 1.2 requires teams to participate in an activity that begins with a brain dump of all the pertinent issues and areas of focus being placed in the first column under Area of Focus. We have added some of the common issues that we find in schools. The SLT needs to discuss each one and identify whether or not it is a true crisis using the three-part

1.2 Crisis Filter Table

Area of Focus	Important	Urgent	Persistent	Crisis?
Equity	X	X	X	Yes
Grading Practices	X	X	X	Yes
Third-Grade Reading Levels	X	X	X	Yes
Puke in the Hallway		X		No
Disgruntled Parent	X	X		No
Choose a Reading Month Theme	X		X	No
Staff Shortages	X	X	X	Yes

Crisis Model: Important, Urgent, and Persistent. The lens for each is as follows:

> **Important:** Fundamentally impacts teaching and learning.
> **Urgent:** Time-sensitive, needs immediate attention, and requires skillful resolve.
> **Persistent:** On-going, complex, with long-term implications.

When completing the table, don't hold back on placing issues in the area of focus. Too often, school leaders will omit urgent but small issues because they are common occurrences within the school. Angry parents and spills are common, but ignoring them and not having a system in place to handle them will hijack an administrator's day, preventing her from ensuring that the daily activities are aligned to the strategic focus. So be sure to include a variety of issues you face so you can

intentionally develop processes to address them effectively and efficiently.

If an angry parent shows up at school, the administrative assistant should know how to communicate with the parent effectively. If there is a spill in the hall, there should be a clear line of communication to facilities. Both examples are common and can be easily managed, but they are also all too easy to be mishandled and can create unnecessary havoc. The table serves two purposes, one is to identify the limitless number of issues in school; the other is to name what we have as a true crisis.

If an issue meets all three categories, it can be defined as a crisis that needs a mindshift to a crisis mindset that, again, embraces an unfiltered 360° view and approach to solving problems with urgency that abandons conventional wisdom.

In a practical school setting, the model and table are designed to help school leaders concentrate on those elusive and seemingly impossible problems to solve. Let's dig into the teacher shortage issue a bit more. A school's SLT would decide if this is a crisis or not using the three elements in the model. Granted, this is not a crisis for every school system, but we would argue that it is an educational crisis that has been looming for many decades.

The classroom is the most important space in a school. Is the shortage persistent? Yes, since the 1970s fewer and fewer people have been entering the profession. Is it urgent? Yes, each year, more and more classrooms are left without highly qualified teachers at the beginning of the year, particularly in STEM areas. This may not be a crisis within your school system. You may have tons of qualified teachers beating down the doors to get in. That's why every SLT needs to conduct their own analysis. It's also why we don't propose to solve these problems for you. Each school is unique. What we know is that every school needs to make this mindshift if we want these perennial problems to go away.

Reflection Questions

1. What key points stand out to you in this chapter?

2. Does the Crisis Mindset approach run counter to your current thinking about school leadership? If so, how?

3. Think of a current crisis you're addressing—how might a Crisis Mindset approach change the way you're solving that crisis?

4. If you adopted a Crisis Mindset approach, what would change in your leadership practice or strategic planning?