WE ALL KNOW HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO MAKE CHANGE. Think about how challenging it is to make simple changes to our own behaviors. There’s a reason why so many of our New Year’s resolutions are relegated to the trash heap mere days after heartily committing to the “new you.” Talking about change is easy. Execution is hard. Many of us are familiar with the adage, “It takes 21 days to form a habit.” And while that sounds daunting, the truth is even more discouraging. A study published in the European Journal of School Psychology (Lally et al., 2009) reveals that it actually takes between 18 to 254 days for a single person to form a single new habit.

Think about this for a second: one person, making one change, can take up to 8 months.

Wow. Now consider the time and effort needed to create organizational change, to move a group of people toward new habits and new behaviors. It’s a wonder anything has ever changed. The struggle is real. You likely know this. Chances are, you’re living it. In the midst of this struggle, I’m thrilled that you have the wisdom and humility to seek new tools and resources for practical support. I’m excited for both you and your stakeholders that you’ve chosen to look more deeply at your own practices, challenge existing school norms, and put your students first.

Make no mistake: You—the school leader—are the key to student success. Cultivating a “students first” culture starts with you. You must model the way. You must act, interact with, and engage with staff and students in a way that makes school stakeholders feel seen, heard, and valued. In The Instructional Change Agent, Dr. Adam Drummond
provides a clear pathway for creating “students first” schools that honor educators, staff members, and, of course, students. It calls for you to be the type of leader who ensures that all students receive the very best education possible. Not sometimes. Not most of the time. But every single day of the school year.

Perhaps you’ve read the last few paragraphs, and you’re now thinking you should set down this book. “I’m not a principal,” you say to yourself. “I’m not in a leadership position. This has nothing to do with me.” Think again. We are all change agents. Yes, all of us. Regardless of position or title, each of us possesses the power and responsibility to drive meaningful change in the name of student achievement. Change agents exist both inside and outside of organizations and spearhead transformation to promote growth and progress. In this sense, whether we are formal or informal leaders, we all possess incredible power and responsibility.

Power and a sense of responsibility require action. But action without knowledge is simply movement. And we can’t mistake movement for progress. With this in mind, how do we move forward, with purpose, to do the noble work of improving our schools on behalf of the children we serve? Simple. We engage in important conversations about why change needs to happen. Then we make it happen—collectively, collaboratively, and purposefully. The Instructional Change Agent is rich in conversations concerning both the why and the how. Being a change agent is equal parts thinking and doing.

In the pages to come, you’ll explore 48 practical “Ways” to support meaningful actions that drive meaningful change. Adam has organized these Ways into clearly defined parts that reflect what he sees as the four keys of effective school leadership: culture, instructional planning, learner engagement, and community partnerships. These are real-world strategies that will help you find, identify, celebrate, and push for instructional excellence. To successfully transform schools, you must have honest conversations, hold yourself and others accountable, gain feedback from students, and always be present. Through Adam’s four keys, you can ensure that instruction in your school is inspiring and engaging, rigorous and relevant.
The Instructional Change Agent challenges each of us to lead school change through the inclusion of student voice. As is demonstrated here so brilliantly, we need to create a sense of urgency and understanding in how student voice can impact the work we do in all areas of education. When we incorporate student voice in the learning process, we increase learner engagement and bolster relevancy in classrooms. We need to make sure that adults know this. Even more important, though, we must be sure that the students know that their ideas, opinions, and concerns matter—that they have agency in the classroom.

Your interest in Adam’s work reveals a number of very encouraging qualities. First, you care deeply about children. Second, you care deeply about your colleagues. For this, both Adam and I offer our most sincere gratitude. Let your affinities for both students and educators guide your actions. Try early, fail often, pursue excellence with joy, and be an omnipresent model of lifelong learning. Wrap yourself in the passion needed to survive and thrive in our shared profession. My hope for you in the pages to come is that you find practical steps for how to execute change and reignite the fire inside, the one that burns for why we seek to make those changes in the first place.

If today’s children are tomorrow’s leaders—as Adam and I so fervently believe—then we as educational professionals must create the conditions for students to be engaged by and invested in their learning. We must understand school culture and how to change it through innovative policies and intentional plans. We must, in short, grasp the fundamental knowledge and the practical tools necessary to become successful instructional change agents for our schools.

Our students deserve nothing less.

—Weston Kieschnick, ICLE Senior Fellow and author of Bold School