

# Thrive

## How Schools Will Win the Education Revolution

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# Introduction

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Sixty-five million years ago, an asteroid roughly the size of Manhattan crashed into the earth with the force of more than a billion Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs. It led to one of the three greatest species extinctions in the history of the planet. In the moments, days, weeks, and decades after the impact, conditions on Earth changed *a lot*. Many species went extinct, including all of your childhood favorite dinosaurs. Even the best, most well-meaning, possibly even “nicest” (in a dinosaur kind of way) Tyrannosaurus Rexes died in the great Cretaceous extinction.

But some species survived. Many animals, plants, sea creatures, and insects we know today somehow made it through that long global winter: crocodiles, sharks, corals, fish, birds, insects, and some little, fuzzy critters that launched the line of mammals from which we all are descendants not only *survived* this great global calamity, but they *thrived* in an explosion of evolutionary success.

Here’s the thing: Evolution, either catastrophic like those few years following the asteroid impact or over a much longer period of time, is neither fair nor kind. It is just a force.

During periods of evolution, individuals and species live and die based on their ability to adapt to new conditions. We are currently experiencing a period of global social, technological, economic, and information evolution more rapid than any in the history of humankind. These changing conditions are starting to dramatically impact our systems of education, as families with a radical menu of different options select learning experiences that they think will best prepare their students for a rapidly changing future.

Thankfully, we have not been hit by an asteroid, but the powerful ripples of education innovation are driving some schools toward extinction, threatening the future of others, and creating incredible opportunities for those with vision and courage.

Education is just now starting to feel the impacts of a world of consumer choice. A mere two decades ago, consumers bought what large producers of goods and services told us to buy. Today, around the globe and across virtually every sector of the economy, those tables have turned 180 degrees. Consumers say, “This is what I want, when I want it, where I want it,” and producers either create those products and services or they go out of business. This is the evolving world of Uber, not Yellow Cab; Amazon, not Sears; Schwab, not Lehman Brothers; Airbnb, not Hyatt; iTunes, not Sony Records; GrubHub, not Applebee’s.

Thankfully, most schools are not for-profit businesses, but schools are *not* immune from this fundamental change. Unlike businesses, many school systems haven’t traditionally had to compete for students. Twenty years ago in America, roughly 90 percent of students went to their neighborhood public

school. Now that number in some cities and regions is 50 percent and dropping, and in some areas, that curve is steepening, not flattening. And the number of school-age students is falling. Every indication is that in the future both public and private schools will increasingly compete for fewer students who have more choices.

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If you want your school to survive and thrive in this evolutionary future, you have to understand something that most educators have never had to learn. Marketing guru Seth Godin (2018) puts it in the simplest possible terms: *“The heart and soul of a thriving enterprise is the irrational pursuit of becoming irresistible.”*

Regardless of your title at school, you have a role to play in the pursuit of becoming irresistible to families in your community. Your school needs a powerful value proposition that shouts to families, “Pick us!” from all of the options they have. Schools that increase their value proposition over time will have a greater chance of survival; those that fail to boost their perceived value will tend toward failure. We need great schools that provide great learning to not only survive, but thrive.

These impacts are being felt by urban, rural, rich, poor, public, charter, and tuition-charging schools. I have visited and worked with underserved public districts in rural areas where the next school is 40 miles away and school consolidation would mean the loss of a critical community resource. And I have visited and worked with some of the wealthiest, blue-blooded East Coast boarding schools with huge endowments and a long line of students begging to attend. So far, I have not visited a school team that feels 100 percent safe from potential extinction 20 years from now.

Is the problem really this dire? Are some schools really on the verge of becoming extinct? Here are some of the shouts of anxiety, even fear, that I have heard in the last three years at schools just like yours. Have you heard some of them, too?

- “With districtwide choice, families are choosing the magnet schools over our neighborhood school.”
- “The private schools are giving more financial aid, and stealing all of our best students.”
- “We have always been considered one of the best schools in our city, but we can’t compete with online schools that are able to prepare students for the best colleges.”
- “The state office is trying to merge our small district with the one in a town 25 miles from here. If we lose our school, we lose one of the few things keeping our town alive.”
- “The public schools are providing the same programs we are, and they don’t charge tuition.”
- “The damn charters are stealing all of our kids.”
- “We don’t have the resources to take care of kids who live in poverty and struggle to even make it here to school every day.”
- “My sister goes to a school where they don’t sit and listen to teachers all day. She loves going to school; I want to go there.”
- “Some of our teachers split off and created a charter school with exactly our same program, just a few miles away. How are we supposed to compete with that?”

- “We’re evaluated by the state on test scores, but our parents and kids don’t care about test scores; they want to learn stuff that is going to help them get a good job.”
- “We have an incredible reputation, a huge endowment, and our students get into the best colleges, but we’re afraid we might not be in business in 20 years.”
- “I have one child at a school where the kids are bored and hate going to school and one at a school where the kids are excited and want to stay after school to work on cool projects. Why can’t both my kids go to *that* school?”
- “We can’t find young people to hire who have the skills we need in today’s economy.”

I could go on with stories and quotes from parents, teachers, administrators, students, and community stakeholders. You probably have plenty of your own. These are the sounds of schools that have been successful for decades, suddenly finding themselves struggling to compete for students in a time of falling birth rates, vastly greater competition, and a future that is much less knowable than it has ever been in the past. These are the sounds of individuals and perhaps entire species of “school” in the throes of evolutionary selection for which they are not prepared.

## Building Hope

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There is great news. We know how to deal with these evolutionary pressures. We know how to not only survive but thrive when competition forces or allows us to change. Organizations have been faced with these evolutionary disruptions for centuries. Business schools and bookstores are packed with classes and shelves on how to not only survive but thrive in the face of these challenges. It’s likely that neither you nor most members of your school team have taken MBA courses in surviving change and organizational change management, nor do you have the time to read all the books on that shelf of knowledge.

Change means new opportunities to thrill students and their parents. You have the opportunity to connect to your most important purpose, to understand the unique value that you, as a group of passionate educators, can deliver in a way that differentiates you from others. You can understand what families want most and build learning experiences proactively rather than waiting to respond, flat-footed to unpredictable market forces.

And the even greater news? *Your irresistible school of the future is in demand!* It is both needed and wanted by parents and students who know that the traditional school model is not delivering all that they hope for in a school. You can change how your school approaches learning in ways that improve learning for more students! Your “best school” is not a commodity that looks and feels like all others. You can still deliver on what is required by

law and college admission offices *and* create something unique that is both educationally profound and attracts families who share your vision. Your school can be the one around which passionate families rally because you have turned a remarkable vision for better learning outcomes into a delivered reality.

Can your school become the one that is attracting more students in this challenging environment? Yes. Is it simple and quick? No. Are there plenty of pitfalls? Yes. Will it work? Yes. Can it lead to better learning outcomes? Yes. How do we know? Because schools all over the country, some of which look a lot like yours, are already on this path.

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## What This Book is And What it is Not

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This book is about giving schools the best chance to survive and thrive in periods of rapid evolution, translated specifically for educators. Schools are *not* like Silicon Valley start-ups or big legacy corporations. Schools have special cultures, language, purpose, and conditions. Yet we can learn from those other organizations; the basic rules still apply. This book is the Venn overlap between the best practices of evolving organizations and the realities of running a school.

This book is primarily for school administrators—seasoned, new, and aspirational—who recognize the inevitability of change. Many veteran administrators have spent much of their careers in a time when change was mandated by the Department of Education, not by rising market forces. Newer administrators will be increasingly required to act as effective agents of organizational change as shifting consumer demands and expectations increasingly influence the nature of our schools. Aspirational leaders, that critical cohort of current teachers and noneducators who hope to craft the direction of education in the future, should start practicing these skills by leading innovative change from their own classrooms or offices.

This book is about giving the best version of your school its best chance to be around for many years, delivering a learning experience that prepares young people for life beyond school. That is the goal.

This book is very specifically *not* about what K–12 learning looks like in the first quintile of the twenty-first century. Many authors have written about and many educators are delivering every day what we are starting to see as a student-centered “deeper learning” experience that encourages student ownership of the learning process, inquiry over answers, and interest-based student engagement. Less than a decade ago, when America was at its point of deepest obsession with standardized test scores, schools that offered this pedagogy were viewed as “progressive” or even “quirky.” Today, when given some degree of freedom from test-driven learning, many students, parents, and teachers prefer both the process and the outcomes of this deeper learning experience. But not every school community wants to make that shift, and I don’t believe there is a single cookbook formula that works for every

school. I certainly do not pretend that I know what is in the best interest of the 99 percent of schools that I have not had the honor to visit.

This book is about the *process* of finding and delivering an aspirational value proposition for *your* school; it is not a prescription for what that value proposition should be. This is a book of *practice* that aligns with *theory*.

The difference between schools that thrive and those that may wilt or die during this period of evolution is not just about *understanding* how your school can thrive; *it's about actually doing it*.

Every part of this book is deeply informed from and by those many dozens of schools I have worked with and those thousands of teachers, administrators, students, and parents with whom I have interacted. These are their stories, their successes, their lessons learned.

One of these profound lessons sticks out: *The tools of change are neither difficult to understand nor complicated to implement*. The difference between schools that thrive and those that may wilt or die during

this period of evolution is not just about *understanding* how your school can thrive; *it's about actually doing it*. It takes time and sustained commitment. That part is up to you.

**A short note to non-American educators:** While I have worked with schools in Canada, New Zealand, the Middle East and a few in South America, Europe, and Asia, the vast majority of my experience is with American schools. The range of school choice, consumer demand, and educational requirements is different for each country. I hope you will translate or interpolate the examples I give in this book into your own conditions. Having said that, I think there is ample reason to believe that the vast majority of the strategies, skills, and tactics that I offer are *not* American-centric and have been proven to work in organizations across a wide range of cultural and political settings.

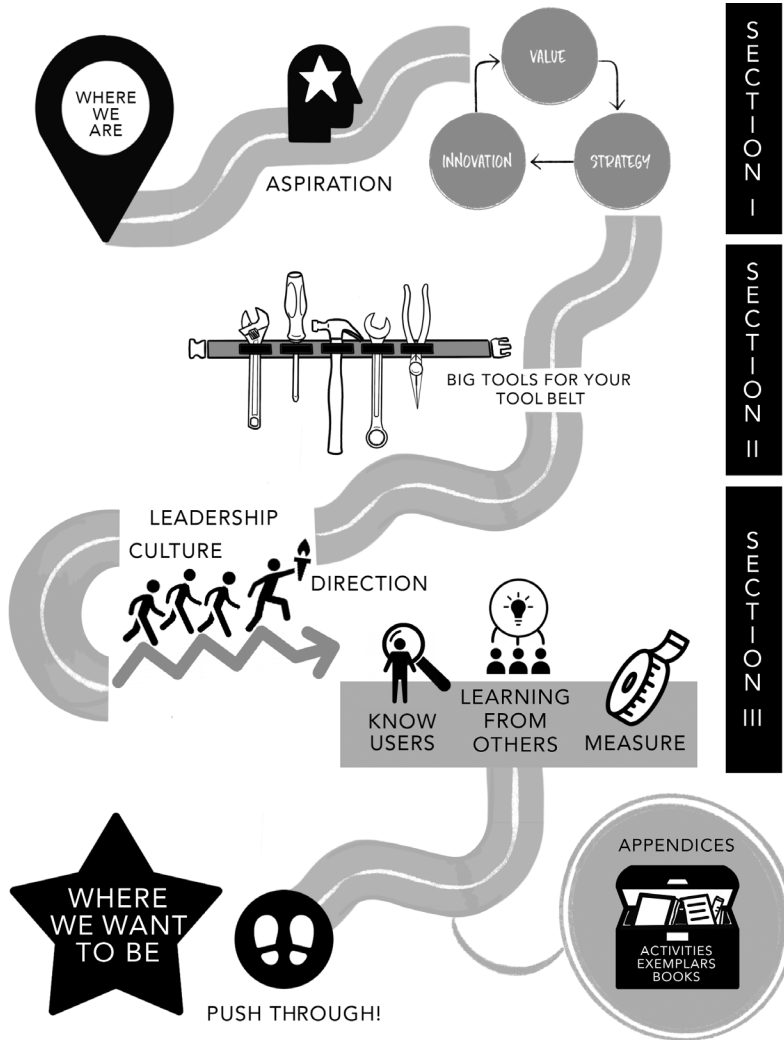
## The Tools in This Book

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The common words that we use and hear—innovation, transformation, personalization, community engagement, marketing, storytelling, strategic planning—are all *processes and tools* we use to achieve that core goal of providing a great learning experience for our students for a long time into the future. The tool kit is robust. Changing an organization such as a school is a complex process. I don't believe we should shy away from complexity with the false hope that tough problems have simple, cookbook solutions. Each chapter is a piece, a tool, or set of tools you can use to help achieve the goal of continuing to serve your community for a long time. Some of these tools come with their own set of helpful metaphors and images; there is no one unifying template I know of that encompasses all of them. That's OK; you will see how the pieces fit together.

The book is broken into three sections (see Figure 0.1). **In Section I**, I define and bring together the three most important concepts in creating long-term success: *value*, *strategy*, and *innovation*. These are words you have heard loosely bandied about education world for years. They are powerful words . . . when we know what they *actually mean* and how to use them.

Figure 0.1 The Road Map for This Book



Source: Andrea Medina, 2019

Together, they are the roots, trunk, branches, and nutrients of any organization that hopes to compete and thrive during times of change. Schools have tried over the last few decades to employ these powerful tools. For the most part, we have failed. You can convert that failure to success in your school.

**Section II** covers what I call the Five Big Tools of strategic change. There are more than this, but these five proven tools are a great place to start. These tools are concrete, relatively simple ways for you and your school team to build both a comfort and capacity for change that can improve learning and create more excitement about what your school has to offer. I know because I have been using them and training school teams just like yours to use them for years. From 2012 to 2018, I have had the privilege to visit and work with thousands of school and community stakeholders at something like



200 schools and districts. I'm the lucky person who gets to see what works, share ideas with colleagues who are creating and testing these tools in their own practices, and test them again and again. I've also had the time to read those shelves of books about innovation, distill the nuggets, try them in real school settings, and share them with you.

**Section III** deals with the pragmatic reality of how to compete in an evolving marketplace of customers/families who have choices about how and where their kids will be educated. In these chapters, I share what works for schools as well as lessons from other businesses that are very different from schools. We will discuss how you can best understand what your families really want and need; how to align those with practices of great learning; and how to reimagine and reconstruct your school organization to be vastly more comfortable, eager, and able to respond to this crazy, changing world in which we live.

I have included two appendices in this book as well. **Appendix I** is a set of activities in which you and your team can engage to actually *do* what this book describes. These are many of the arrows in my quiver that I use when I workshop with school community teams. Some of these I have borrowed and modified from others; some I have created myself. Some take one minute; some take several months. They work. Cumulatively, these are some of the experiential activities that will help your school to build a comfort and capacity for strategic-level change. There is no formula for when to use each activity, and none is so sacred that it cannot be reimaged by you and your team to fit your particular circumstances. These activities are what build the muscle of the organization, which will not happen if you or a subcommittee try to dictate the steps of change.

**Appendix II** contains links to schools, networks, and gatherings where education is evolving in America, places and resources where you and your team can start to find and share creative options that might inform your own value proposition, and how to deliver it to your families. This appendix also contains a very brief set of highlights of books that I have read that have contributed to my thinking, that I may or may not have referenced specifically in this book, and that I think you might have not heard about. Some of them are specific to education, but others are very much not specific to education. All of them are good options for summer reading or book clubs with your faculty, administration, boards, and parents.

## How Long Does it Take to Transform a School?

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The process of change at school rarely follows a linear path, and I don't believe there is a single cookbook recipe that works for all schools. Each school serves a different community, has a different history and culture, has a different level of commitment from leadership, and will come up with different aspirational aiming points. Having said that, I think we are starting to see some boundary conditions to this question.

In 2012, I reported that the evidence showed that for most schools truly significant change could occur over three to five years for the supercommitted

and up to 12 to 15 years for schools that took a more hands-off, “organic” approach. Because of a combination of new tools, much greater sharing of ideas, and the emergence of highly differentiated “lighthouse” schools, the pace of potential transformation is accelerating. For example, Harrisburg School District, a suburban district in South Dakota, has developed a remarkable personalized learning track for elementary and middle school students in just three years, and teachers report they are able to completely retool their teaching practice with just six months of training and support.

There are *no longer specific start and end points* to the kind of user-focused, strategic innovation in which schools are now engaged. There is no one point to use each tool in the book, after which it can be put away for years. The process and tools described in this book are the real-life, real-time expression of “growth mindset” that virtually all educators have adopted as a core tenet of good learning. Organizational evolution becomes a state of being; the pace is less comfortable than the relative stasis of the past several decades. That pace must be considerate of the pressures that school stakeholders already feel, but it does not slow down after a strategic planning cycle every five years. The good news is that many of your stakeholders will relish the opportunity to help make your school irresistible.

## Exemplar Schools

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It is natural that people frequently ask, “What school do you recommend that we visit? Who is really doing it right?”

Ten years ago, there were very few schools in America that were consistently touted as “schools of the future.” Several books and even a movie were made about High Tech High, which is a great exemplar school, but there just were not many others on the educator’s radar screen. Over the last seven years, I have published two books and posted hundreds of blogs that cite well over 200 schools, people, and organizations that might well be viewed as exemplars of school transformation. The schools I cite in this book, including the long list in Appendix II (and many more), are “doing school differently.” I feel I have just touched the tip of the iceberg. And I don’t pretend to be able to associate any one school with a “thing” that they are best known for. (That would be a full-time job, and the listing would be out of date almost as soon as I made it!) But I do think that these schools provide starting points for you and your team to learn more about the enormous blossoming of educational experiences that are evolving in K–12 today. Reach out to them!

## The Sounds Of Schools Thriving

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Some schools will make it through this period of evolution; others will not. There are no guarantees during periods of evolution; some conditions are beyond your control. Evolution is about improving the odds, doing everything you can to ensure long-term survival. Evolution is about surviving and thriving in an environment of competition for limited resources.

Some will immediately translate “resources” as money, and they will be wrong. The most critical resource that you need to sustain your school is *students*. With students comes funding. You can have plenty of money, but lacking students, your school will die. If parents and students choose your school or district, you will have the most critical resource you need (though undoubtedly not all that you want). There is only one uber-critical term in this equation: finding, attracting, and retaining families who choose your school in an ever and rapidly diversifying landscape of consumer choice.

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So here are the sounds of schools *thriving* that I have heard from people at schools with the *same challenges* as yours, the *same obstacles* to change, serving the *same demographics*, working under the *same laws* and regulations, and in the *same competitive environments*:

- “Once we clearly established who we are and what we are going to be best at, we all had a North Star to align our work.”
- “We got out into the community and let them know that ‘there is a better way for your child to learn; come see it.’ They did.”
- “Parents love when their kids are happy and engaged at school. That’s where they want to send their next child.”
- “We just had to show the community what great learning looks like, and they got it. Parents aren’t stupid; they know their children are inheriting a really different world.”
- “I get to work on projects that I helped to design and create. When I am doing work at home, it is work I am interested in, not just a set of math problems.”
- “When we all got on the same page with a really clear strategy and told those stories every day, our admissions shot up.”
- “Most public schools don’t do ‘marketing’; I hired a marketing consultant to rebrand a school with falling enrollment, and in just the first year, enrollment increased.”
- “We were so overwhelmed with other educators coming to see what we were doing differently here that we had to stop informal drop-in tours and set up a couple of days a year to share our story.”
- “I’ve been teaching for 14 years, and I thought I knew my students. I didn’t. Now that we have changed to a much more personalized learning system, I really do know my students as individuals; that’s why I wanted to be a teacher.”
- “If the district decided to backslide on what we have created here, our teachers and parents would file a charter application in a minute. There’s no way they are going to let us lose our vision.”
- [▶](#) You and your school community of stakeholders have a clear choice:

**Door A:** Bet the farm that this is all wrong. Hope that the world really is *not* changing; that we are *not* in a period of evolution that is powerful enough to threaten your school; that your school, for whatever combination of reasons, will remain immune from the forces of change.

**Door B:** Convene another strategic planning team that will recommend some modest tweaks to what you have been doing for years or decades and hope that those continue to intersect with future conditions and demands.

**Door C:** Fight in very positive, fun, engaging, rewarding ways to make your school irresistible!

If you choose Door C, let's roll.