

Teachers Uncaged

Helping Educators Create Meaningful Change

BY FREDERICK M. HESS

There's a lot of smart guidance out there for teachers seeking advice on instruction, pedagogy, curriculum, and culture. But, when it comes to dealing with the practical frustrations that can trip teachers up every day, not so much. For teachers struggling with technology, wasted time, bureaucracy, or professional development, the most widely recommended texts have little to say. In fact, because most advice for teachers emphasizes instruction and collegiality, it can have gaping blind spots regarding policy, dealing with bureaucracy, and the nitty-gritty of teacher leadership.

A couple years back, I wrote a book called *Cage-Busting Leadership*, arguing that K-12 leaders have much more power than they think to create great schools and systems. The problem is that they are routinely stymied by “cages” built of urban legends, or a failure of imagination, or not knowing how to do what they're already free to do. I've spent a lot of time talking about these ideas to gatherings of school, state, and system leaders.

Over time, plenty of teachers have approached me to say: “Rick, I basically liked what you had to say, but most of it doesn't really apply to teachers.” As one teacher put it, with admirable frankness, “My cage is that my principal is a knucklehead, the district won't support my program, my association is off in left field, and



the people writing the laws don't give a crap what I think. So, what do you have for me?”

It was a good question, and the more I thought about it, I realized that teachers inhabit a “cage” of their own, but one very different from that which ensnares school or system administrators. I'm struck by how often even acclaimed teachers tell me that they feel stifled, ignored, undervalued, and marginalized—and aren't sure what to do about it. Some react with anger; others grow bitter; most retreat to their classroom and close the door. The problem is that closing the door doesn't make the frustrations go away; at best, it muffles them.

That was the genesis of my new book, *The Cage-Busting Teacher*, from which this article is drawn. I spent a year interviewing a couple hundred teachers, teacher advocates, union leaders, and others about the cage teachers inhabit and how they can bust out of it. It became clear that while teachers lack ready access to *organizational authority* that school and system leaders can use to bust free of their cage, they have powerful tools of their own, including the ability to tap the *authority of expertise* and to summon *moral authority*. The problem is that most teachers have little understanding of how to marshal and wield these tools. Drawing on the wisdom of savvy practitioners, I seek to offer practical guidance on how teachers can do just that.

Cage-busting is not a substitute for attention to classroom practice, curriculum, and instruction, but a complement. It equips teachers to create the schools and systems where they can do their best work.

What Is the “Cage”?

The cage consists of the accumulated rules, routines, habits, and norms that exhaust teachers' time, energy, and passion. The cage is abject professional isolation for seven hours a day. It's where everything a teacher has built can be undone by administrative churn or inflexibility. It's when even talented teachers wearily warn young colleagues to “stay in your lane.” It's when teachers find that sensible ideas are dismissed because a school is “successful enough” and when they get reprimanded for trying to do more or for not waiting for their turn. The cage is wrought of policies that have destructive effects no one intended.

One New York City teacher I spoke with has led a team that hustled to raise \$100,000 in grants for English language learners and has won teaching awards and national recognition for her efforts. For all that, when she first started teaching at a struggling elementary school and sought to hold after-school tutoring sessions, she was told, “Nope”—an administrator needed to be in the building when students were present, and that wasn't in the cards. Her response? She worked even longer hours, “making home visits, setting up appointments at the public library, McDonald's, wherever.” She was working harder and harder just to compensate for administrators. That's the cage!

What Is “Cage-Busting”?

Cage-busting teachers are *concrete, precise, and practical*. They ask what the problem is, seek workable solutions, and figure out how to put those into practice. Cage-busting is not about garnering headlines or picking fights; it's about creating great places of teaching and learning, one step at a time. Cage-busters know more is possible than

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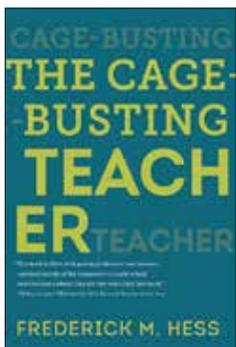


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many teachers may imagine. Sometimes, cage-busting is just getting school or system leaders to pursue policies more sensibly.

Cage-busters believe that teachers can have enormous influence but need to learn how to use their voice. They believe that a focus on problem solving, precision, and responsibility can enable teachers to create the schools and systems where they can do their best work. They don't cage-bust *instead* of tending to curriculum and instruction, but in order to forge schools and systems where their time, passion, and energy make the biggest difference for kids.

In short, cage-busting offers a way forward. Teachers can do much better than venting to their colleagues and hoping for the best. Teachers sometimes feel powerless, but they're not. Superintendents, school leaders, principals, and policymakers are looking for problem solvers, and teachers are better positioned to help solve those problems than anyone else. People care what teachers think. It starts with teachers tackling the things that they see close up and that they can readily influence. It's not about pleasing sentiments or talk, it's about action that shows seriousness and changes culture.

Cage-busting can just be a matter of getting school or system leaders to act more sensibly. I interviewed an English teacher at Martin Luther King Jr. Student Transition Academy, a public alternative school in Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis was piloting the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's massive Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project, including a commitment to incorporating student feedback via a survey. While the survey accounted for just 5 percent of a teacher's score, the teacher told me, "The scores were a freak-out moment for a lot of teachers because we were going to eventually be paid on these scales, and we didn't think they were fair or accurate. ... My students struggle in reading, and the survey was 75 questions long. They'd get bored and stop answering." She also acknowledged, "If anyone knows how teachers are doing, it's students ... I'd advocate for [the survey] but explain why they needed to shorten [it]." So she didn't give up; instead, she helped the district's teacher ambassadors craft a "positive" memo that raised the issue and offered "an idea of what should be done." The district agreed to cut the survey in half. Teachers can sometimes be tempted to fold their arms and tell them-

selves, "Nobody cares what I think." This teacher didn't. She identified a problem and got it solved.

Cage-Busting in Action

It's always better to start by tackling problems at the school level. The problems are clear, people know one another, and proposed solutions can be concrete. But some problems can't be solved closer to home, which means having to deal with legislators and state officials. First off, knowledge matters when tackling policy concerns. It's a waste of time and energy to complain to officials about things they can't control. That's why cage-busters only wade into policy when they know exactly what problem they need to solve and who can solve it. Knowing the details helps avoid unnecessary headaches and enables you to show up in the right office with a workable solution.

Policymakers don't know how policy will play out in a classroom. Most are well aware of this. That's why they're hungry (believe it or not) for educators who can suggest workable solutions. They are more concerned about ends than means. They want to see good schools and improved student outcomes. They're less interested in the details.

If teachers show up with a modicum of sympathy for what policymakers are trying to do, specific problems to address, and workable solutions to suggest, they're pushing on an open door.

Teachers don't have a lot of experience dealing with policymakers, so it's easy for them to misstep. On this score, as throughout my book, experienced hands share some candid advice. In this case, a veteran Capitol Hill staffer, who spent years as a senior education staffer for one of the nation's most influential education lawmakers, shares some straight talk on how to work with lawmakers—whether in Washington, D.C., or state legislatures—and their staff:

- You don't need a lobbyist. "Sometimes people assume you need a lobbyist to make an appointment, but people in Congress work for you. Just call and make an appointment."
- Do your homework. "Know whom you're talking to. ... I worked for a senator who was a champion for kids with disabilities, yet people would come in

complaining about the difficulties of accommodating special needs kids. They had no idea who they were talking to. If they wanted someone who would help weaken those provisions, they needed to go somewhere else."

- Tell me about things I can change. "I can't help people with things that I don't control. Come in and tell me about things that I can change; otherwise, I feel like I'm wasting your time and you're wasting mine."
- Explain what should happen. "It's on the teacher to articulate what needs to change and how that change will solve the problem. That takes some work. It's not easy from the teacher's seat to know whether it's the law or implementation that is the problem. But when you've figured that out, then I'm really interested. Until you do, it's hard for me to know if I can help."
- Remember, lawmakers deal with lots of issues, which means decisions are often made by staff. "On a given day, my boss may have to vote on nuclear disarmament, environmental regulation, changes in juvenile justice programs, and student loans. In any given piece of legislation, 90 percent of the decisions were made by staff. Bills are passed by Congress that not one of the 535 members has actually read. So, keep that in mind when meeting with staff."

Cage-busting is a complement to great classroom teaching, not a substitute for it. Teachers cage-bust so that they can spend less time in dull meetings and more time learning from colleagues. They cage-bust so that they spend fewer minutes watching students listen to announcements and more time infusing students with their passion. They cage-bust so that they spend less energy fuming at pointless paperwork and more energy helping their principals become great.

Now, none of this is easy. It requires teachers to leave the comfort of their classrooms. It calls for taking risks and learning new skills. It means listening to those with whom you disagree, empathizing with administrators, and offering solutions instead of complaints. It's a tough deal, but a good one.

Cage-busters believe it's a deal worth taking. □