Focus on Education

Cage-busting teachers:
Giving our students the education they deserve
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What cage-busters believe

Frederick M. Hess | Rick Hess Straight Up

The launch event of The Cage-Busting Teacher featured an intense discussion into the what, why, and how of cage-busting between the likes of former national teacher of the year and DCPS talent impresario Jason Kamras, teacher ambassador Maddie Fennell, Educators for Excellence co-founder Evan Stone, Gates Foundation teacher honcho Irvin Scott, and NEA prez Lily Eskelsen Garcia.

As folks have heard about the book or read an excerpt, a number have been asking what a cage-busting teacher is — and whether I think this person or that person is a cage-buster. I always tell them that I think cage-busting is more about action than celebrity. I prefer to talk about what cage-busters believe. So, just what do cage-busters believe? Well, let’s see . . .

Cage-busters believe that actions change culture, and that talk does not. They heed the advice of Larry Bossidy, veteran CEO and coauthor of “Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done,” who says, “We don’t think ourselves into a new way of acting; we act ourselves into a new way of thinking.” They know that “culture change” can otherwise be short-lived.

Cage-busters believe that teachers can have enormous influence — but need to learn how to use their voice. Cage-busters recognize that earning influence and professional respect requires reshaping a profession that has accepted the comfortable routines of the 19th-century schoolhouse for too long.

Cage-busters believe that management, not teachers, ought to be blamed if management fails to address mediocrity anywhere in a school system, but that teachers ought to insist that management do its duty. If teachers don’t do that, cage-busters understand that they’ll have trouble convincing observers of their professionalism and commitment to excellence.
Cage-busters believe that “teacher leadership” is a cheery, amorphous term that’s only meaningful when it gets concrete. Cage-busters are less interested in debating, “Who’s really for the kids?” than in asking, “What’s the problem we need to solve and how do we solve it?” They believe in the value of precision and clarity. They believe it’s better to say “an extra 45 minutes a day of instruction” than “extended learning time” and “an extra 30 minutes of computer-assisted tutoring” than “blended learning.”

Cage-busters 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. Rather, they cage-bust because they believe it will help forge schools and systems where their time, passion, and energy make the biggest difference for kids.

Cage-busters believe that the “lucky” get luckier. As I wrote this book, educators would sometimes ask me about it. After I’d share a story or two, most would half-sigh and say, “That’s interesting — but these are the exceptions.” They’d explain that these educators were teachers of the year, or National Board certified, or part of some privileged network, or blessed with a great principal. In other words: they were the lucky few. What’s easy to miss is how often these teachers make their own luck. Candice Willie-Lawes, a special education teacher in New York City, says, “I intentionally built a good relationship with my AP, who is now my principal. Currently, she’s assigned me a teaching schedule with an alternate population of 15 students and five wonderful para-professionals/teaching assistants. I can do my thing because I have that trust. I built it up over the past eight years. No one is going to respect you unless you’ve earned it. But once I earned it, it freed me to bust out of the cage.” Cage-busters identify problems, offer solutions, find strength in numbers, manage up, and — gosh — they keep getting lucky.

Finally, cage-busters don’t just believe — they know — that this stuff is hard and there will be plenty of missteps. But, because each win dismantles another piece of the cage, they also know that time is on the cage-buster’s side. Maddie Fennell, classroom veteran, former Nebraska teacher of the year, US Teaching Ambassador, National Board certified teacher, chair of the NEA’s Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching, and RHSU fan favorite, and good friend, puts it well. Maddie has enjoyed enormous success — and she’s also had her share of setbacks. One was the time she was deposed as union president. She says, “I cried for two weeks. I didn’t want to get out of bed. Then I knew I had to get back into the classroom. I was back in my element. And, you know what? I was stronger for it.”
A breakout role for teachers

Frederick M. Hess | Education Next

In Cage-Busting Leadership, I argued that K–12 leaders have much more power than they think to create great schools and systems. The problem is that they are routinely trapped in “cages” of their own design. They’re blocked by urban legends, timidity, a failure of imagination, or not knowing what they’re already free to do.

In my new book, The Cage-Busting Teacher, I explore the reality that teachers inhabit a “cage” of their own — but a very different one from that which ensnares school or system administrators. The teacher cage is all the routines, rules, and habits that exhaust teachers’ time and energy. Breaking free means being eager to champion excellence, identify important problems, offer concrete solutions, and bring those solutions to life.

It is true that teachers lack the ready access to organizational authority that school and system leaders can use to bust free. They have less control over budgets and staffing. What teachers have, though, is the ability to tap the authority of expertise and to summon moral authority. Cage-busting teachers find ways, inside or outside their classrooms, to bring all of their ideas and experience to bear.

Cage-busting teachers

Cage-busters know that more is possible than teachers may imagine. As Bill Raabe, a veteran educator and the NEA’s longtime authority on collective bargaining, says, “Teachers can usually do a lot more than they think. Teachers often start from a deficit model. They assume, ‘There’s nothing we can do — because of the contract or because of policy.’ They should be asking, ‘What do we want to do?’ and then figuring out how to make that happen.”

Jacob Pactor, a high school English teacher at Speedway High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, was charged with improving support for failing students. His plan involved having teachers report student
data monthly, rather than waiting for quarterly intervals. This would help teachers catch problems early. Teachers were on board but, after a while, says Pactor, “The principal didn’t like seeing all of the Fs. And he wasn’t willing to let us follow through on any of our proposed consequences — stuff like after-school detention where students would have to do their homework. So he cut the practice off.” Pactor explored his options. He asked the school secretary if there was a way to update the online gradebook in real time. She said it was just an easy technological change — meaning teachers could now get updates every day, instead of every nine weeks. Pactor went to the principal with the idea, and the principal told him, “Sure.” Pactor reflects, “Without having to institute a formal policy, teachers now knew how students were doing in each other’s classes. They could plan interventions accordingly.”

Brent Maddin, provost at the Relay Graduate School of Education, recalls teaching in Franklin, Louisiana, where, he says, “Our school had this policy that students had to be in the top of the class to take the ACT. The guidance counselor would not give other kids an ACT packet. The philosophy was, if other kids took the test, their scores would make the school look bad. I called ACT and got some packets myself. I started dealing them from my back porch, like I was trafficking in something illegal, not ACT materials. The guidance counselor was furious. She said, ‘I work with the ACT.’ Ultimately, though, the principal said, ‘If you’re going to hand out packets, then you need to do prep.’ So we began running after-school and Saturday prep. By the end of the year, once they thought about it, the administration was on board. After all, that’s why we were all there. But, if we were doing it, they wanted the school to look good. Two years later, we’d added an official ACT prep course.”

Candice Willie-Lawes, a New York City special education teacher, describes herself as “a big believer in positive reinforcement and encouragement.” When she found herself in a school that was “rigid and unforgiving,” she “subtly suggested” changes. She says, “We didn’t have recess, so I suggested we give recess at the end of a week to kids who’d been on exceptionally good behavior. We didn’t do field trips, so I suggested we do a trip for students who’d read a certain amount of books as part of a reading program. I just suggested little things here and there. Even though I wanted to, I never stormed into my principal’s office to say, ‘You don’t know what’s good for kids!’ But bit by bit I chipped away. By June, I felt like our students were getting a normal childhood experience.” Willie-Lawes didn’t pick fights. She changed things one subtle step at a time.

But cage-busters know that they sometimes need to step out of their schools or classrooms to do their best work. Cage-busters wonder whether being a teacher should necessarily mean spending six hours a day in a classroom with 20 or 30 kids. They ask hard questions about what teachers do and how schools and systems can help them do it
Teaching teachers how to lead beyond their classroom

— Frederick M. Hess | The Cage-Busting Teacher video series

Cage-busting beyond the classroom

Sometimes cage-busters believe they can do their best work in their current school or system, and sometimes they feel like the better course is to launch a charter school, a new organization, an education tech venture, or something else. But this should be a choice and not an act of desperation. Cage-busters don’t just accept the world, complain about it, or retreat from it; they reshape it into a place where they and their colleagues can do their best work.

Many teachers confess feeling guilty about changing schools or changing roles. They shouldn’t. Cage-busters see the classroom as a place of possibility, not a prison. Sometimes the cage-buster’s best bet is to find a role in which he can do his best work. Elliot Sanchez founded Louisiana’s mSchool, a tech startup providing computer-assisted math tutoring, after he taught and tried his hand at district and state roles. After all that, he says, “I felt like if I wanted to do my best work and make a real difference, I had to do it outside of the state and district system.” Cage-busters celebrate those who choose to seek new possibilities, inside or outside of the classroom.

Jason Kamras, chief of human capital for the DC Public Schools, started out teaching middle school math and in 2005 was named the National Teacher of the Year. What prompted him to leave the classroom? Kamras says, “I was able to do some very exciting things with 150 kids every year. But, as a classroom teacher, there’s a fairly finite impact you can have even when you’re really trying to innovate. There were things I wanted to change that I couldn’t from Room 112. So when a couple of cage-busting district leaders asked me to join them, I went for it.” Because they think in terms of possibilities, cage-busters are open to new opportunities when they arise.

Emerge: Solving the “getting kids to college” problem

As a fifth-grade teacher in Houston, Rick Cruz never intended to launch an initiative to help at-risk kids go to great colleges. But, as he watched his fifth graders enter middle school, he saw that he “had talented students who lacked the means or social capital to advance.” Cruz had gone to Yale and recalled talking to a colleague about what it had been like to be a minority student at an elite college. During their chat, he floated the idea of a program that “would identify students with stellar academic potential and prepare them to successfully apply to and persist in selective colleges.”

My mentor was the district’s chief academic officer [CAO]. I told him, “I have this idea of creating a program that would mirror what private consultants do for wealthy high achievers.” He set me up with a principal
at a high school where I could run the program…Just being able to say, “The district’s CAO stands behind this,” opened doors. The principal was receptive, but told me he doubted we’d get 10 kids who were interested. Turns out we had 125 kids apply. When the principal saw that, he asked, “What’d you promise them?”

We selected 14 students for that first group. We started by introducing them to the schools out there. We explained to them that these schools have generous financial aid policies — that students can go if they get in, and that it’s usually cheaper to go to these private schools, with need-based aid, than to community college. Then something clicked.

Emerge begins each year with a boot camp on how to write a personal statement and submit a strong college application. Students are mentored by graduates of selective schools and receive intensive SAT and ACT prep, visit college campuses, and get a feel for college life. The program starts with local colleges but, says Cruz, “We take students up to the Northeast, where they travel through Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Providence, and New Haven. They stay in the dorms at Columbia and Tufts and interact with students and professors at Harvard and Yale.” Within a year, Cruz’s initiative caught the eye of Houston superintendent Terry Grier (see “Still Reforming after All These Years,” interview, Fall 2014) who offered Cruz the chance to take the program districtwide.

Grier promoted Cruz to assistant superintendent for college readiness, allowing him to shift from a small nonprofit effort at a couple of schools to a role where he could help more than 200,000 students across 300 schools. At first, Cruz hesitated. “I was nervous about the internal politics. I knew I’d be really young and would be perceived as inexperienced. I also didn’t know whether I’d be able to operate as effectively within the constraints of a large bureaucracy.” Cruz told Grier his concerns. As Grier tells it, “I promised he’d have 100 percent support. I told him he’d have all the authority he’d need, with no boundaries, no bureaucracies. I said he wouldn’t hear the word ‘no.’” (Note that Cruz got this assurance before taking the job, when he still had leverage.)

Early on Cruz faced a massive bottleneck. He reported to a senior district official who was blowing him off. This went on for months, until Cruz bumped into Grier in a hallway and the superintendent asked how things were going. Grier told Cruz that, effective immediately, he’d be reporting directly to him and that there were no “noes.” Grier says, “The guy above Cruz was frustrated and jealous. Rick’s only mistake was to keep trying to work through channels rather than coming to me right away.” Then there is the seniority thing. Cruz wasn’t yet 30 when he was promoted. That can be a recipe for resentment. But, as Cruz says, “in a lot of professions you’re up or out before 30. A lawyer can be a partner in a big firm by 30.” The cages wrought by hierarchy and seniority are a mind-set, not an inevitability.
Cruz says, “We started off with just volunteers. Now we have five full-time program managers and are working in 14 high schools. We’ll be adding schools and students in the years to come. We’ve partnered with Yale for a summer Emerge program.” In 2014 Emerge graduated 63 seniors, each of whom was admitted to a school ranked in the top 100 nationally by US News & World Report, and almost all were accepted by institutions promising to meet 100 percent of their financial need. Emerge alums were accepted at Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, MIT, Stanford, and Yale, among others. Backed by Cruz’s team, the graduating class received over $250 million in scholarship and financial aid offers — a district record and an increase of more than $60 million from the year before.

LearnZillion: Solving the teacher isolation problem

Eric Westendorf started teaching in Indonesia. On returning to the United States, he taught in New York and then North Carolina. After graduating from Stanford Business School, he served for five years as assistant principal, principal, and then CAO at E. L. Haynes, a Washington, DC, charter school. Westendorf says, “We got to a place where we were doing all the things people write about. We were recruiting fantastic teachers. We had a culture of no excuses and high performance. We were collaborating outside of regular school hours. We were doing data-driven instruction. We were letting go those people who weren’t performing. But I still felt like we were a long way off. It came down to the fact that teachers, even in this collaborative environment, were mostly working in isolation.”

He tells of a terrific sixth-grade teacher who had a great technique for teaching division of fractions. As principal, he had time to see it, but his teachers didn’t. He says, “We paid lip service to observing one another, but we all had crazy schedules. So there was no way to really spread pedagogical content knowledge or routinely see the practice of colleagues. That’s where LearnZillion came from. The idea was to solve a problem. The problem was how teachers could more readily learn from their colleagues. I started by asking, ‘What if we could capture teacher expertise and share it with others in a simple way, where teachers don’t have to leave their classroom to see it?’”

With a former Stanford classmate, Westendorf built a Web portal where teachers could share materials, resources, and instructional videos for math and English language arts instruction in grades 2–12. He says, “We’d cobbled together Google Docs and YouTube videos so teachers could use that in their classrooms. What made the difference was that we had a minimally viable product. We won $250,000 from the Next Generation Learning Challenges and got started.” Today, LearnZillion offers thousands of Common Core–aligned lessons, along with instructional resources, “director’s cut” videos explaining the lessons, customizable materials, and more — all of which allow teachers to borrow and learn from talented colleagues.
Westendorf advises, “Don’t spend all your time dreaming up something ideal. Just try your idea. As soon as you do, you start learning stuff. I thought, at first, once I had teachers create a few lessons, it ought to be easy for them to churn out new ones. But no one created new lessons for a week. When I asked about it, they responded, ‘Of course, we didn’t. It’s because we’re ridiculously busy.’ It was helpful that I tried, failed, and learned that early on.”

In 2011 LearnZillion launched its first Dream Team. Each year LearnZillion selects 200 accomplished teachers to gather for TeachFest, three days of intense, collaborative lesson planning. The idea is to provide outstanding educators a chance to work with grade-level and content-area peers from across the nation, putting their best work together. Westendorf says, "What's interesting is how many people came to us after the experience and said, ‘Oh, my God, it totally changed the way I think about myself as a teacher. The frustration was getting to me, but now, for the first time, I can really think of myself as a leader.’ These are people who are used to not getting recognized. One of our California teachers got tapped for the state commission on implementing the Common Core because she was on the Dream Team. One thing leads to another once you’re proactive. It starts with baby steps, but then it’s a bigger step and a bigger one.”

Westendorf says one of LearnZillion’s goals is to remind teachers that they’re professionals and should expect to be treated accordingly. With TeachFest, “we want it to be full of delight. We have them fill out a survey before they arrive, and we study those. While they’re in line at registration, we can approach them and say, ‘You must be Henry. That story you filled out about when you were six years old; that was amazing.’ It’s hard work, but it’s fun. We offered teachers the night off for a Ferris Bueller’s Day Off experience in Atlanta, but 60 chose to stay down in the basement room we had reserved to work on their lessons. It’s engaging, empowering work. When we wrap up, people are really jazzed. There are tears, even singing, and teachers saying, ‘This changed my life.’” This was a model that allowed great teachers to grow, connect, and have a national impact — all while remaining firmly planted in their classrooms.

Sure, Westendorf has left the classroom to tackle this problem. But a cage-buster would have a hard time suggesting that he’s left schools, teachers, or students behind.

**Enriched: Solving the substitute teacher problem**

Andre Feigler recalls that she liked teaching in Louisiana’s St. Bernard Parish. “My administration was generally pretty supportive, though I never really felt like they were interested in my ideas about systematic changes.” One of these ideas was her belief that substitute teaching was a mess and could be dramatically improved. She says, “The substitute issue is something every teacher dreads. You worry
that your class will be a [mess] when you get back. I’d spend so much
time planning lessons, writing letters to my kids on the board. And then
I’d still wind up leaving a movie and a busywork packet. They don’t get
anybody until the last minute, so the subs weren’t prepared and they
wouldn’t care.”

Feigler muses, “I never really said, ‘Let’s go to the principal and
propose another system.’ Maybe I should have. But I never felt like she
was looking for ideas or inviting discussion from teachers. I wish that
part of our PD had been them asking, ‘What are the worst parts of your
job? Why aren’t the kids learning? Bring two or three ideas next week
about what we can do.’ But that wasn’t the approach my administration
took.”

She admits that she “didn’t fully realize how the substitute system
works. The secretary has this yellow pad, starts calling names, and
gets someone to show up. It’s a scramble every morning.” She started
just trying to learn more about how it worked in different systems. “I
asked everyone I could find, ‘How does it work in your school? What’s
the worst part about this for you?’ I talked to finance managers,
operations people, HR directors, instructional coaches…As long as I
approached it like, ‘I want to learn from you, because here’s something
that might make life better for everybody,’ people were pretty willing to
share.” Along the way, Feigler learned that the problem was even more
significant than she’d known — that schools spend $4 billion a year on
subs.

She says, “I talked to a teacher at KIPP who told me that the hardest
thing was having to cover someone else’s class once a week. They rely
on internal coverage at a lot of the charter schools. It was his number
one frustration. He’d told KIPP he was thinking of leaving if they didn’t
figure that out, that teachers were burning out. He invited me to meet
with his administration. I probably said 10 words at that meeting,
because he was making the case for me.”

She launched a venture called Enriched. The first step was figuring
out exactly what her solution was. She says the key was getting
concrete: “Who’s the user here? Is it the teacher or the office manager?
How much will they pay for this? It helped me turn it into a workable
model.” When meeting with schools, “I usually don’t need to tell them
a lot. Schools already know how much of a headache this is, so what’s
most effective is when I say, ‘I have a hunch you have this problem,’
and then they jump in to say, ‘Yes, we really do,’ and ‘Can you help?’”

Enriched provides carefully vetted, trained subs who can teach well
or who offer a unique experience. Feigler says, “We have accomplished
local poets, artists, and authors. Our pool is 75 percent African-
American. So we offer something special. The proof is really in the
pudding for the schools, but what makes us distinct is recruitment. We
target presence. We want subs who can walk in and own the room.
That’s the main thing. But we also seek teaching experience and people native to the community. Then we work on preparation and training, take feedback seriously, and try to take care of our network of educators.” Feigler’s tale is a nice case of looking with fresh eyes at an old problem that often gets taken for granted, and then devising a solution to suit.

There is much that teachers can do right now, today. But there are also real limits to what teachers can do in roles, classrooms, and schools designed for the world of a century ago. These structures can limit the ability of teachers to make the best use of their talents or to reimagine stifling routines.

If changes are called for, they can be difficult to pursue within an isolated classroom, or even within an existing school or system. That’s why cage-busters sometimes push beyond those four walls. Following such a course should be neither a first choice nor a last resort. As always, it should be a question of a teacher pursuing the path that she thinks will yield the kinds of schools and classrooms equal to their own ambitions.

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Casual observers can be forgiven for wondering why the push to improve America’s schools looks like a World War I battlefield. Reform advocates blast schools as failing and call for a raft of remedies, from teacher evaluation to charter schooling. Teachers react defensively, condemning these proposals as an attack on schooling and their profession.

Who’s right? Why do advocates and educators seem so deeply divided? Can anything be done to get us on a more fruitful path?

First off, it’s vital to recognize that both sides are right, but are looking at things from different vantage points. If you’re focusing on educational outcomes, the results can be disheartening. In 2013, only 42 percent of the nation’s fourth graders were deemed proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and just 35 percent were proficient in reading. Eighth graders fare worse. And low-income, black, and Latino children do worse than that.

Yet, these figures are incomplete. Reading and math scores have been steadily improving in the U.S. for two decades. Parents have mostly good things to say about their own schools, with about 70 percent consistently saying they’d give their oldest child’s school an “A” or “B.” And teachers can be responsible professionals and still struggle to overcome the forces of poverty, family fragmentation and neighborhood dysfunction.

Reformers see schools as a means towards a larger agenda of social betterment. They’re less concerned with the social fabric of schools or what educators think they can be fairly asked to do than with the measurable results. If they have to break a few eggs along the way, so be it. The most vocal reformers hurl blame and aren’t worried about whether their language or policies are fair to individual educators.

Educators, on the other hand, spend their days in schools. They take pride in their work. Most think they’re doing their best, and that their best is pretty good. They have a sense of what they believe schools can and can’t do, and are
sensitive to the problems proposed by reformers, who they think are seeking to
scapegoat them for society’s failings. The most vocal teachers lash out, accuse
reformers of mounting a “war” on public education. This then reaffirms
reformers’ conviction that teachers are part of the problem.

So what can be done about all this? For starters, reformers and educators
need to realize that they will continue to see things differently — and that’s okay.
They’re supposed to see things differently. Educators are looking from the
inside-out, and reformers from the outside-in. Educators experience how
schools work, while reformers concentrate on the results. This should be a
healthy tension, and requires the two camps to listen to and learn from each
other.

There are at least four steps that can help get us to that place.

First, most educators and reformers are more reasonable than you might
imagine from the public debate. The problem is that the loudest voices are the
most extreme, while the more measured voices remain silent or get drowned
out. Both educators and reformers need to do a better job of challenging, calling
out, or reining in those who revel in accusations of malice.

Second, the two sides need to understand that their fates are linked.
Educators know where the rubber hits the road, but that’s because they spend
their days in schools that do things a certain way. The flip side of that is they
have less time to craft policies or build relationships with policymakers. It’s
reformers who have the time and expertise to work with officials to craft new
policies, but how those policies play out depends on teachers.

Third, public school teachers need to keep in mind that they’re public
employees. When outspoken teachers impute evil motives to reformers or
discount the importance of test results, it can appear that educators are blind
to the problems and unwilling to step up. This is doubly true when those same
voices belittle accountability systems or defend tenure even for colleagues guilty
of egregious misbehavior. If teachers want to influence policy, they need to
show they’re responsive to the concerns of policymakers.

Finally, reformers need to remember that they’re not the ones who do the
work. After all, policymakers can make people do things, but they can’t make
them do them well. Unfortunately, when it comes to schooling, how reforms are
adopted matters infinitely more than whether they are. This means that
educators are not just a “human capital” problem to be solved; they’re the ones
who are actually educating children. How to help teachers do that better should
be the organizing principle of reform.

There’s a temptation to pick a side in the school reform wars — to side with
the reformers fighting for vulnerable kids or the teachers battling to safeguard
our schools. But both sides have got it only part right. This means “winning” (at
least for the kids) is less a question of picking sides than devising some rules
in what has been an anything-goes clash. Mustering the discipline and mutual
respect to do this should be an eminently manageable task. After all, as we
frequently remind one another, these are our schools and our nation’s children.
Teachers uncaged

Frederick M. Hess | American Educator

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 afterschool 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 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 and 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 themselves, “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, DC, 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.
Recently, I penned a column about “Why Can’t Politicians Get Out of Schooling?” It was met with some predictable pushback, including by readers who asked why pols pick on teachers and not cops or doctors. Of course, that’s just flat wrong. Go ask those police in New York City who turned their backs on the mayor or physicians furious about accountability metrics and reimbursement rates written into the Affordable Care Act. The reality is that public employees and those reliant on public funds are always subject to political decisions, and those decisions are always informed by lots of things other than what the affected parties think would make for good policy.

This brings up a related point. I’ve seen some of the advice in The Cage-Busting Teacher described as “lean in” for educators. That’s not quite right. I’m a political scientist, not a pop culture guru. My advice is geared more to explaining how public employees can thrive in public bureaucracies. So, to paraphrase Jerry Maguire’s plaintive plea in Jerry Maguire, what can public employees do to help policymakers help them?

First, believe it or not, teachers have a sympathetic audience. People care what teachers think. In 2013, the annual Gallup poll on schooling found that more than 70 percent of Americans have “trust and confidence” in public school teachers. Greg Mullenholz was a Washington Teaching Ambassador in 2011. Mullenholz says, “What fascinated me was this perception that folks at [the US Department of Education] would look at us and think, ‘They’re just teachers.’ But the high-level folks actually had a lot of respect for what we had to say. We would meet with them regularly to discuss the feedback we were getting from teachers in the field, and they’d use it to inform what they were doing.”

Second, keep in mind that policymakers can make people do things, but they can’t make them do them well. Policy is a blunt tool: it tells people what they must do, or what they must not do, and that’s about it. That
works passably well if the challenge is collecting taxes or mailing out Social Security checks. But it works less well when the question is school improvement. The problem is that policymakers can’t make schools or systems adopt reforms wisely or well. The trick is, most of what we care about when it comes to teaching and learning is about how you do things, rather than whether you do them. Yet, equipped only with blunt instruments, policymakers are under a lot of pressure to make the world a better place. Worse, policymakers know that their good ideas often go south once they’re implemented, which makes them hesitant to trust those on the ground. That’s why they’re eager to find sympathetic professionals who can help figure out how to ensure that policies actually do what they’re supposed to do.

Policymakers aren’t writing laws for people they know and trust; they’re writing them for strangers who they’re entrusting with the public’s kids. Randy Dorn, superintendent of Washington State, is a former teacher, principal, and legislator. Dorn says, “Politics is really relationships, just like schooling is. I always ask educators, would you give ten dollars to a stranger who walks up to you on the street? Because that’s how a lot of people approach legislators. They show up and just ask for millions of dollars or laws that they’d like to see. If a stranger walks up to you on the street and says, ‘Can I have ten dollars? My child needs it,’ you don’t know whether to trust them. You probably won’t give it to them. But, if you’ve seen them and talked to them two or three times, and you feel you’ll meet them a fourth time, then they’re an acquaintance. Now you’re a lot more likely to lend them the money.”

Third, keep in mind that rules are written heavy-handedly . . . on purpose, with an eye to stopping obvious stupidity. Policymakers can’t make rules that only apply to bad actors. As one key US Senate staffer explains, “I see these educators who are doing great things out in schools and systems. I want to write the rules for them. But I can’t. I have to write them for the lowest common denominator.” Public officials are responsible for taxpayer funds and the quality of schooling. If someone hundreds of miles away misspends funds or harms a kid, public officials may be blamed and will certainly be expected to fix it. As a consequence, aggressive self-policing and mechanisms to safeguard against malfeasance are crucial. Show up with those kinds of alternatives in mind. Denouncing accountability or evaluation systems, and having no alternative to offer other than “trust us,” is a losing hand.

Fourth, when educators do get the chance to speak to policymakers or in public hearings, they often do so in ways that don’t help their cause. If you understand where policymakers are coming from, it gets a lot easier to focus on what might influence them. This means doing three things in particular. One, don’t demand more money. Everybody asks lawmakers for money. If policymakers had more money to give, they’d give it. Harping on that will suck all the oxygen out of the room, and won’t accomplish much. Two, emphasize shared concerns. In other words, presume that officials
care about the same kids that you do — and explain the idea with a view to how they might see things. And, three, offer solutions and let them know how they can help, besides forking over more bucks.

I remember meeting with a group of accomplished North Carolina teachers who were disheartened by the state’s decision to abolish tenure, eliminate hundreds of millions of dollars annually in pay for advanced degrees, and use only a small portion of the savings to create a modest annual bonus of $500 for a quarter of the state’s teachers. The teachers were irked and offended. I totally got that. But those legislators also had valid concerns. They were concerned that tenure too often protected the undeserving and that paying for advanced degrees subsidized too much course-taking that didn’t improve instruction. Disagreement should not be a reason to dismiss a legislator as misinformed or hopeless.

Those legislators may not want to pay for education degrees, but that doesn’t mean they’re wedded to cutting teacher pay. If teachers take policymakers’ concerns seriously and propose a viable alternative, they can alter the terms of the discussion. Rather than arguing whether to pay for the old credentials or to cut pay, the question can be how those dollars can best attract, retain, and energize terrific teaching. Framed that way, it’s tougher for anyone to argue that the money should simply go away — or to dismiss the proposals educators are putting forward.

Obviously, there’s a lot more to all this. For anyone who wants to dig deeper, check out my new book, The Cage-Busting Teacher.
Flashback: Teaching reform

Frederick M. Hess | National Review

Those who fear that the big problem with America’s schools is the teachers who work in them would be heartened by spending a little time at an Educators 4 Excellence (E4E) conclave. Sydney Morris and Evan Stone launched Educators 4 Excellence in 2010 to push unions and schools to get serious about recognizing excellence and addressing mediocrity. The idea of E4E germinated during their hour-long commute on the 4 train from New York’s East Village up to their elementary school in the North Bronx, when they had plenty of time to share their frustrations. Says Morris, “In room 402, I could close the door and focus on my students. In that room, I had lots of responsibility, autonomy, and control. Yet beyond those four walls, I had little say in any decision that affected my students or me as a professional.”

Morris and Stone launched E4E after learning that, in the United Federation of Teachers’ 2010 leadership election, 65 percent of the votes were cast by retirees or non-classroom personnel. Morris marvels, “Classroom teachers were actually a minority of the folks who voted in that election!” Together with a dozen colleagues, Morris and Stone penned a declaration of beliefs that became the foundation of E4E. Stone says, “We had a bunch of teachers from seven or eight schools, some new and some with a decade or more of experience, but we all had the same frustrations: a lack of meaningful feedback, of tools and supports, of aspirational career pathways. The goal was to lay out our visions and beliefs and see if other teachers felt the same way.”

Teaching has long suffered occasional bouts of enthusiasm for “new unionism,” which promises to end industrial-era conventions in favor of a performance-oriented culture. Such talk has consistently come up empty because of entrenched union resistance, adverse conditions, and a lack of organizational muscle. But we may be in the midst of a more significant shift, as a generation of teacher-reformers seeks to take advantage of changes that give them a fighting chance.
The teachers’ unions face some daunting challenges. Financial headwinds have caused decades of persistent spending growth in schooling to give way to choppier waters, pitting young teachers against old on issues such as layoffs and pensions. Successful GOP efforts to narrow the scope of collective bargaining in states such as Wisconsin and Indiana have cost unions members and threatened their clout. Reformers fighting to curtail tenure protections and to get serious about teacher evaluation are visible across the land. And, for the first time in memory, these trends have caused the mighty 3 million–member National Education Association to suffer substantial membership losses. Unions are struggling to regain their footing and just may be forced to evolve.

Today’s teacher-reformers may be fresh-faced, but they’re also passionate, tech-enabled, and backed by big philanthropy and professional operatives. They’re fighting for an outsider’s reform agenda with an insider’s credibility and savvy. E4E’s declaration calls for the kind of tough-minded reform that teachers are often thought to oppose. It calls for a system that uses “an evenhanded performance-based pay structure to reward excellent teachers.” It calls for eliminating “last in, first out” layoffs and ensuring that tenure is a “significant professional milestone.” And it advocates “place[ing] student achievement first” when making decisions about schooling or spending.

Stone says that advocating these beliefs hasn’t been easy. There have been plenty of petty attacks and cheap shots. “But,” he says, “we kept growing because we offered like-minded teachers camaraderie and a safe space for solutions-oriented dialogue. It wasn’t one teacher standing up, but many standing together.” Today, E4E encompasses more than 15,000 teachers in locales including New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Connecticut, and Minnesota.

Meanwhile, the union diehards may not be as strong as is commonly assumed. Teach for America co-CEO Matt Kramer observes that TFA alumni (who include both Morris and Stone) have long shown little interest in pursuing union leadership. More recently, he says, “we’ve started to see promising stories of TFA members and alumni getting involved. . . . When our people get involved, they see the ways they can make a difference, they step up, and we’re seeing changes. The unions have been held captive by a fringe element. But that’s changing in some places.”

Celine Coggins launched the Boston-based Teach Plus in 2009 because, she says, “at the time, when we talked about performance-based pay or teacher leadership, union leaders could say, ‘Teachers don’t want that,’ as if teachers were monolithic. And no one could really challenge or question them when they said that. I thought it’d make sense to bring teachers together, especially younger teachers, and see what they said.”

Drawing on her experience in both the classroom and the Massachusetts department of education, Coggins says, “When teachers think about unions and city councils, most of them think those are a waste
of time and that it’s all just talk. Connecting the dots helps them get over that.” Teach Plus has put forward teacher-inspired plans for merit pay, performance-based evaluation, and tenure reform that have influenced policy in a number of cities and states. Today, there are more than 17,000 Teach Plus members in cities such as Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Memphis, DC, and Indianapolis.

E4E and Teach Plus aren’t alone. Other ventures include New Orleans–based Leading Educators, Chicago-based VIVA Teachers, Gates Foundation–sponsored ECET2, and the reinvigorated National Network of State Teachers of the Year. Much of this activity has been turbocharged by a generation of energetic TFA corps members.

It can be easier than onlookers expect for these reformers to win over the silent majority of teachers and change the direction of their unions. After all, teachers know better than anyone that they suffer for the incompetents in their midst. The journal Education Next reported in 2014 that teachers believe 5 percent of those teaching in their local school systems deserve an “F” and another 8 percent a “D.” The independent think tank Education Sector has found that 75 percent of teachers want their union to make it simpler to remove ineffective teachers, and a survey by Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that 89 percent believe tenure should reflect teacher effectiveness.

Mike Stryer started teaching high-school social studies in Los Angeles after nearly two decades in international business. Elected a building representative to the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), Stryer walked into his first union meeting and noted that the topic of discussion was not L.A.’s “35 percent dropout rate” but “the condition of Bolivian tin miners.” He says, “It made me realize why a lot of teachers are completely turned off by the union. It didn’t represent classroom realities, the needs of teachers, or the needs of students.”

In response, Stryer helped launch NewTLA. Stryer and his allies elected 75 teachers to the 300-member UTLA assembly. Stryer laughs, “I was called everything under the sun. Folks were saying, ‘You have a hidden agenda, you’re a privatizer.’ Just the other week, I was called a ‘Kool-Aid-drinking Nazi propagandist.’” The same group then pushed the UTLA to fight for teacher evaluations that would be based in part on student achievement.

Anticipating a fight, Stryer “studied the contract and the bylaws. It turns out we could bypass the leadership and take a referendum directly to the members if we got 500 members to sign a petition. The result couldn’t be overturned. Few people even knew you could do that. But we gathered the signatures and got it approved with 56 percent support. That made it the ‘official policy’ of the UTLA.” His success provided a model for a group of Boston Teachers Union members to form a group named BTU Votes and successfully fight to open up their union elections.

Accountability will set teachers free

— Frederick M. Hess | Las Vegas Review-Journal
Stryer says, “Money could have helped, but it wasn’t necessary. This was all social media and word of mouth. It really only takes a few people. We were able to do this in Los Angeles with a core group of five!”

It’s easy for politicians and reformers to paint with too broad a brush. When it comes to teachers and unions, the usual formulation has been, “Teachers’ unions are awful, but we love our teachers.” This line has proven as ineffective as it is incoherent. For one thing, as Stanford University political scientist Terry Moe has shown, teachers’ unions generally reflect the preferences of their members. For another, attacks on tenure make clear that reformers think there are plenty of teachers who don’t deserve to be loved.

At a time when tens of thousands of reform-minded teachers have organized a vanguard, reformers would do well to paint teachers and unions with a finer brush. Rather than disparage unions or offer insincere laurels to all teachers, reformers should stand foursquare behind teachers who are fighting for professional responsibility.

Twenty-first-century school reform, from Bush’s No Child Left Behind to Obama’s Race to the Top, has suffered for its fascination with grand national solutions. Efforts by today’s teachers reveal a more Tocquevillian impulse. Theirs is the activism of shopkeepers stripping off their aprons and working to set things right. Such an effort is altogether admirable. These teachers bring to the reform cause not only hard-won credibility, but also a practical appreciation of consequences and daily realities that can elude impassioned advocates who talk while others do.