Preface

The world today is changing at a fast pace. We are seeing technology advance at a frenetic rate, which is having a powerful impact on our learners. It is not that our students are actually learning differently per se, but the environment in which they are learning is dramatically different. The engaging aspects of technology today and ubiquitous access to information provide constant engagement to learners of all ages. They have embraced this digital world as it provides consistent relevance and meaning through an array of interactive experiences. As a result the job of schools and educators has become exponentially more difficult as a natural disconnect results when students enter their school buildings. This disconnect manifests itself as the school environment is the exact opposite of this engaging world that our learners are now a part of. If students cannot learn the way we now teach or in the conditions that are prevalent, maybe we need to teach the way they learn and create a school environment that more closely aligns with their world.

This book, *UnCommon Learning*, provides a process for schools to initiate sustainable change resulting in a transformation of the learning culture to one that works better and resonates with our students. It lays out the elements necessary for

establishing innovative initiatives that will enhance learning while increasing relevance to personalize both the school and learning experience for all students. Uncommon learning refers to initiatives and pedagogical techniques that are not present in scale in a typical school. If present they are more likely to be isolated practices that have not become systematically embedded as part of school or district culture. These initiatives allow students to use real-world tools to do real-world work, focus on developing skill sets that society demands, respond to student interests, empower students to be owners of their learning, and focus on ways to create an environment that is more reflective of the current digital worlds. They take advantage of an emphasis on deeper learning that new national and state standards provide while allowing students to demonstrate mastery in ways that not only prove attainment but also afford them the ability to acquire and apply skill sets necessary in today's digital worlds. New standards are not seen as impediments but rather opportunities for students to demonstrate conceptual mastery in more authentic ways. The author presents successful uncommon learning initiatives that he helped implement as a school principal as well as examples from other schools across the country. He also pulls on leadership strategies presented in the best-selling book *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* (2014) published by Corwin Press.

Within a framework of uncommon learning initiatives, this book focuses on four key areas that are embedded within each chapter:

- Culture
- Relevance
- Personalization
- Sustainability

Culture trumps strategy. Without the right culture in place it is difficult, if not impossible, to implement school or district initiatives at scale that personalize and individualize the learning experience for students while imparting relevance in

the process. A culture needs to be built first where an initial shared vision is created around these focus areas. This book will assist you in developing not only a vision but also a specific plan for action that when implemented and subsequently monitored, will lead to the proliferation of uncommon learning practices.

AUDIENCE

This book should be read by anyone looking to initiate sustainable change system-wide to create schools that work better for our students through the implementation of uncommon learning initiatives. The unique nature of this book is that it caters to a diverse audience as it addresses aspects of innovative learning ideas and initiatives that are cost-effective and scalable. The primary audience for the book is school (superintendents, principals, assistant principals, directors of curriculum, and supervisors) and teacher leaders. A secondary audience is higher education professionals as they could integrate this book into their preparation programs; many people would agree that exposure to unique learning opportunities at that level is limited at best.

THE CALL

For many years New Milford High School was just like virtually every other public school in the United States, defined solely by traditional indicators of success such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, and acceptances to four-year colleges. These indicators have become so embedded in the minds of those judging our schools and work that we, like everyone else, worked hard to focus only on initiatives that would hopefully produce favorable outcomes in those areas. If we were doing well we continued down the same path, allowing the status quo to remain embedded. The mentality of "if it isn't broken, don't fix it" resonated so profoundly with us

that we would not have even considered changing our ways. If results were not what our stakeholders wanted, we would hold meetings leading to the development of action plans to get us back on course.

There is still an innate desire to sustain a school structure and function that has remained relatively unchanged for well over a hundred years. This is a problem. We were in a rut and didn't even know it. Luckily change came in the form of a little blue bird that gave me the kick in the butt that I desperately needed back in 2009. Being blessed with an amazing staff, student body, administrative team, and community provided the necessary support needed to move us forward.

This is where I experienced a change in mind-set, which up until this point could best be described as fixed. Carol Dweck (2006) spent decades researching achievement and success, which focused one's mind-set. She found that people who had fixed mind-sets believed that their basic qualities, such as intelligence or talent, were simply fixed traits. As a result they spent time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing it. People possessing fixed mind-sets also believed that talent alone creates success without much effort. Dweck's research proved this to not be the case. On the other hand she found that people possessing growth mind-sets believed that their most basic abilities could be developed through dedication and hard work, with their brains and talent as starting points. From this perspective a love of learning and resilience essential for success leads to accomplishment. As Dweck found, all great people have these qualities and can overcome a fixed mentality through choice and motivation.

Moving from a fixed to a growth mind-set and feeding off the daily inspiration that connected learning provides gave me the fuel to create a shared vision that eventually became a reality as a result of action. I was exposed to a whole new world that, until this point, I didn't know existed. Social media provided a doorway to this world where I saw firsthand schools and educators implementing

uncommon learning initiatives that were accompanied with results. The problem was that we were not doing anything remotely close to what I experienced through social media. It was at this moment in time that I decided to induce the change that I wished to see in my school and begin down a new path.

For change to be successful, it must be sustained. As educators we must not only be willing to see the process through, but we must also create conditions that promote a change in mentality. Educators need to understand why change is needed and be provided with a clear focus for implementation. If they are then put in a position to take calculated risks, knowing that the support to do so is there, then with each resulting success, an inherent appreciation and value for the change evolve. The change process then gets a boost from an intrinsic motivational force that not only jump-starts the initiative but allows for the embrace of change as opposed to always spending precious time to get staff to buy in to change initiatives. We should never have to sell people on better ways to do our noble work nor rely on mandates and directives. These traditional pathways used to drive change typically result in resentment, undermining, and failure.

Even in the face of challenges in the form of education reform mandates, Common Core alignment, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exams, new educator evaluation systems, loss of funding, and an aging infrastructure, educators have not only persevered but also proved that positive change can happen with the right mind-set. During a five-year stretch from 2009 through 2014, we saw improvements in the traditional indicators of success by mainly focusing on creating a school that worked better for our students as opposed to one that has always worked well for us as adults. This book will lay out the strategies we implemented in addition to examples from other innovative schools and educators to create a culture focused on uncommon learning initiatives.

CENTRAL FOCUS OF THIS BOOK

The premise of this book is to illustrate how traditional school cultures can be radically changed even in the face of an endless array of challenges and obstacles that are described in Chapter 1. The time for excuses, talk, opinions, and fear needs to end if our goal is really about improving teaching, learning, and leadership outcomes. Leadership is about action, not position or ideas that get pushed around. Leaders need to take action to overcome fixed positions and ideas that simply get put off. This book will lay down the foundation leading to sustainable changes needed in schools that work for kids. We need to continue to push ourselves to create a better school and education system.

When it comes to technology in general, the overall goal is to support learning, not drive instruction. Where digital learning initiatives miss the point is a focus on how technology actually accomplishes this. Schools invest billions of dollars to purchase technology with no real thought as to how it is actually impacting learning. When I routinely ask school leaders how they determine or measure the impact of their technology on student learning, I get blank stares or open declarations that they have no idea. Uncommon learning moves past a bells-and-whistles approach to technology integration to ensure that the tools are having an impact on learning, which is monitored and validated through quality assessments.

The right culture focuses on technology as a tool to enhance learning in a variety of ways. When technology is integrated with purpose, students can create artifacts to demonstrate conceptual mastery, apply an array of acquired skills, illustrate the construction of new knowledge, and be empowered to take ownership over their learning. It also can increase relevance and make the curriculum more contextual. The right culture also provides learning experiences that are aligned to student interests and passions while preparing them to succeed in jobs that have not even been created yet. Uncommon learning initiatives should complement the work

that is already taking place in schools while allowing students to clearly see the value in their learning. The key is sustainability and a resulting change that sees innovative learning become an embedded component of school culture as opposed to isolated pockets of excellence. Without the right culture in place for digital learning to be embraced and thrive, there will be only isolated pockets of excellence. Chapter 2 will address the essential elements needed to support an array of uncommon learning initiatives that will be discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters. These elements work in concert with one another to develop school cultures that support uncommon learning across the curriculum, throughout the school, and extending well beyond the school day.

Uncommon Learning Initiatives

The whole premise of uncommon learning is to increase relevance, add context, acquire then apply essential skills, construct new knowledge, and enhance critical literacies. Regardless of what standards you are accountable for, uncommon learning initiatives with and without technology can be integrated seamlessly to foster deeper learning. Chapter 2 will set the stage for the implementation of the following initiatives:

- **Digital learning across the curriculum:** Today's learners yearn to use real-world tools to do real-world work. Effective digital learning environments focus on learning outcomes as opposed to the tools themselves. This chapter will address the basic tenet that the role of technology is to support learning, not drive instruction. The concepts of digital learning will be presented and discussed. Practitioner vignettes providing details on pedagogy, learning activities, and assessment will appear here and throughout subsequent chapters.
- **Makerspaces:** These spaces provide cost-effective ways for any school to transform a dull or underutilized space

into a vibrant learning environment. These spaces compel students to create, tinker, invent, problem solve, collaborate, and think to learn. Makerspaces can be created on any budget and motivate students to learn on their own time. They also become supplemental learning spaces for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-related classes and courses.

- **Blended and virtual learning:** Traditional schooling, as dictated by brick-and-mortar buildings and mainstay pedagogical techniques, no longer meets the diverse learning needs of all students. This chapter will address how schools easily implement both blended and virtual learning opportunities to personalize and individualize instruction with technology. It also will discuss the flipped classroom approach. This new pedagogical technique continues to be implemented across the globe. Pulling from practitioner examples, this chapter will look at many variations of the flipped classroom with an emphasis on how educators themselves can create short, interactive learning experiences that provide more time for the application of concepts during class.

- **Bring your own device (BYOD):** Many students now possess a powerful learning tool in the form of mobile technology. This chapter will address the potential challenges and advantages of implementing a BYOD initiative. Issues such as equity, infrastructure, policy development, digital responsibility, pedagogy, and tools will be discussed. The end result is creating an environment that empowers students to use the tools they possess as mobile learning devices to enhance learning, increase productivity, develop positive digital footprints, and conduct better research.

- **Digital badges and micro-credentials:** Digital badges are beginning to be embraced as a means to acknowledge a particular skill, accomplishment, or quality associated with learning. This chapter will look at how

schools have begun to integrate digital badges to acknowledge the informal learning of teachers and formal learning of students.

- **Academies and smaller learning communities:** These programs represent a bold vision and direction based on student interests, national and global need, and intangible skill sets necessary for success. This chapter will examine how schools can create their own unique academy programs on a limited budget to expand course offerings, form mutually beneficial partnerships, and provide authentic learning experiences that students yearn for.

- **Connected learning:** Educators today can learn anytime, from anywhere, with anyone they choose. This paradigm shift eliminates the notion of schools being silos of information and educators feeling that they reside on isolated learning islands. Connected learning shatters the construct of traditional learning options such as conferences and workshops as the only viable means for professional growth. This chapter will provide a foundation for innovative learning using social media that will continuously support uncommon learning.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The first two chapters set the stage for why change is needed along with specific strategies and ideas for implementation. After Chapter 2 the flow of the book is such that each subsequent chapter represents a separate uncommon learning initiative. This allows the reader to select a particular focus area of interest without having to read the book cover to cover. Throughout each of these chapters are vignettes illustrating key ideas and implementation tips so that the reader can begin the change process. Relevant links also have been incorporated into these chapters to add depth and

provide further details on each initiative. Pertinent graphics and data related to how each initiative has had a positive impact on student achievement also are included throughout the book. An appendix provides additional resources to assist leaders with implementation.