

STEPPING OUTSIDE YOUR **COMFORT ZONE**

Lessons
for
School
Leaders



Nelson Beaudoin

Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone

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Nelson Beaudoin

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Dedication

To my wife Sharon
for her constant support,
and to Jamie and Matthew
who continue to enrich our lives.

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Meet the Author

With over thirty-four years of experience in educational leadership, Nelson Beaudoin brings practical and exciting ideas to the discussion on school reform. His work is guided by the belief that leaders should listen more than talk, care more than judge, and understand more than guess.

Beaudoin has led two high schools through a Comprehensive School Reform grant. His schools have received national recognition both as a Service Learning Leader School (2001) and as a First Amendment Project School (2004). He was selected Maine's 2000 NASSP Principal of the Year.

He has presented his message about inspirational leadership, the magic of student voice, and creating a culture of change throughout the country. His faculty's work on Professional Learning Communities, Student-Led Conferences, and Student Engagement has been replicated in a number of schools.

Nelson Beaudoin is currently principal at Kennebunk High School in Kennebunk, Maine.

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Preface

Several astounding events led to the development of this book. The first was receiving a communication from a publisher asking me to put my stories in writing. He had heard me present at a conference, enjoyed my storytelling, and felt that my stories would provide meaningful lessons for other school leaders.

I am in my thirty-fourth year as an educator, and my focus has always been on the school and students I serve. Never had I considered branching out to a wider audience. This invitation to write my stories hit a nerve of wonderment, so I decided to pursue it further. After numerous conversations with the publisher, I attempted to write down some of my stories. Amazingly, this was easier than I had thought it would be. When I started writing, I realized that I had many stories to tell. With each story that I completed, another idea popped into my head. Soon I had completed a dozen stories. These stories seemed to have meaning—and bring enjoyment—to friends and colleagues with whom I shared drafts. I was still not convinced though that I was writing a book. I was at a loss regarding a central focus that would tie the stories together.

One weekend when my youngest son, Matt, came home for a visit, I decided to share my first dozen stories with him. I had paid a lot of money for his four-year degree in English literature, so why not get his critique? Matt had witnessed my work first hand. He had spent his youth attending schools where I worked. He had also worked on my faculty as a long-term substitute teacher. After he read my stories and we talked about them, I mentioned that I had a hard time believing that this work would ever reach publication. I couldn't see how all these stories would connect to one another.

My son awoke the next morning and told me that he had thought of a focus for my book. He suggested that I write about experiences that demonstrate my willingness to take risks. He recollected that most of my work involved my leaving my comfort zone. He went on to give me a few examples of what he

meant. As I listened, I started to agree that the notion of stepping outside one's comfort zone had some merit. I have always sensed that great things usually don't happen to those who are cautious and guarded. Great things happen in a climate of exploration and risk. Matt was right—whether I was a teacher, coach, or administrator, I often operated outside my comfort zone.

Leading from outside, or even within the fringes, of one's comfort zone is somewhat of a rarity in schools nowadays. Educators typically choose familiarity and safety when faced with making decisions. Considering the pressures and demands they encounter, the reluctance to experiment is understandable. Predictable results and the avoidance of controversy seem more compelling than the unknown consequences of new ideas. The notion of passing my decisions through a filter that is not focused on control and predictability frees me to consider what is best for students. This route may lead to high levels of anxiety and tension, but it also leads to excitement and inspiration. In considering this concept, I realized that I had found the foundation for most of my stories. This awakening was the second extraordinary event that occurred as this book was unfolding. My son had determined the purpose of this work. He had identified a compelling reason that someone might have for reading this collection of stories.

The book evolved naturally into four sections. Each section has a special meaning and serves to link the stories together. "Making a Difference," "Images of Leadership," "Giving Students Voice," and "Educational Change" could comfortably apply to any of the accounts found in this book. Between the lines of each narrative, you will sense my effort to make a difference for my school and its students. This commitment allows me to approach my work as an educator with the courage to do things differently. Maintaining the status quo or taking the most comfortable route does not often create the necessary stimulus for different outcomes to occur in classrooms. The desired results of improving schools are more likely to transpire in a climate of innovation. The stories within this book illustrate how taking risks can result in positive changes.

I could never write or speak about my occupation without addressing the role of students as partners in my journey. The value of student voice and the exceptional accomplishments that I have observed because of it cannot be overstated. Students keep me both grounded and suspended through it all.

As I expand on the notion of leaving one's comfort zone, the idea of change threads its way through each story. Change leads to discomfort, to feelings of incompetence and self-doubt. But even though those feelings exist, I hope to show that the outcomes are usually good and sometimes miraculous. My students, my staff, and I have been the beneficiaries each time I have explored the world beyond my comfort zone.

The prospect that these simple stories may have meaning and influence others has helped me to overcome my initial reluctance to write and led me to venture into an area of what I consider risk. In many ways, this work plays back on itself. I have written it from a familiar place—outside my comfort zone. Perhaps this book will demonstrate that it is from there that good things tend to happen.

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1

Making a Difference