CHAPTER 18.

REWRITING THE RULES OF SCHOOL: A NEW GAME TO PLAY

BY SEANN DIKKERS

Our students were overcoming disabling realities and that gave them the unique opportunity to work harder, learn smarter, and "fail forward" with a level of character and effort that were worthy of our admiration and respect.[1] We didn't have to pretend they were achieving; they were playing the new game and winning.

INTRODUCTION AND PREVIEW

Imagine that you arrive at school as a high school student each day and see hallways full of strangers because you spend most of your day being "pulled out" of your classes for remedial math, reading, and because you had a history of getting into trouble in "regular ed" classrooms. Your total contact with other people during the day is reduced to your case manager and a handful of other students in your situation. Lessons are straight from a book, the special education teachers are kind, but not passionate about the curricular material, and when you ask why you need to learn "this," they say it is for "the test." As you spend a few hours of the entire school day in a single room, you get tired, bored, and you start to dream of your 16th birthday when you can drop out of this isolation and tedium …

Until you take a bit of time to see special education services through the eyes of our students, it is hard to fully capture what it was like for those students in a small Northern Minnesota town when I arrived as the new principal. Faculty were interpreting state laws and using "accommodations" without designing for motivation, engagement, and investment. Removal from class was a "solution" to disruptions and the extra attention that some students needed. The paradox was that the adults delivering the program were undoubtedly caring, thoughtful, compassionate, and hardworking educators. As I got to know them, I saw clearly that everyone thought he or she was doing what was best for children.

This well-intentioned dissonance is not uncommon. It reflects a nation of schools that present a set of "game rules" to students that actually do not play out very well. From the perspective of students, schools are a complex system that includes goals, strategies, social elements, and feedback loops. While "good" games draw players in with the chance to learn, play, or connect with other people, bad ones are often overly simple, controlling, and/or isolating. For most students, to play the game of

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1. Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *Failing forward: Turning mistakes into stepping stones for success.* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

school, they need to show up, obey rules, and do work for six hours a day, invest energy and effort at home every night, and then take a test that tells them they are average or poor at the game. If they do what we tell them, do they "win"? If the work is difficult, attendance is tiresome, and the monotony of uninspired work is not connected to an appealing "win state," then why play? If you know you are "bad" at a game, or that you will not likely "win," do you continue to play it? If a game is too easy, or you'll "win" regardless of your effort, do you still enjoy it? The ugly side of this "game" is that it's required. When players choose not to play, we punish them. When schools do not perform for federal dollars, we punish the schools. We try to care, and then we offer a game with massive required effort and very little payoff for the player or the designers. Nationally, we have this growing suspicion that the "game" doesn't work.

In Minnesota, the problem was not how much we cared, nor how much we reduced student workload, but to what degree we, as a community, were communicating the "game" of school to students and what "rule set" we put in place. To do this we had to think differently. By understanding and using better game-like systems, we trusted that students actually thrived when challenged, responded to prompts appealing to their intrinsic motivation, and were capable of achieving at higher levels when we presented a better game. We just had to change the game and how we used words to communicate it: Why play this game? Because you'll be a better person, because effort is internally worthy, and because we are your audience waiting for champions.

I use the term *game* when I share this story. Game designers may not see this as a proper "game" or even cringe a bit when I use this term. Yet *game* is the term we used when we unveiled the new plan to students and other faculty. We asked them to be more "playful," to "play" the "game" of school, and if they provided the "want to," we would provide the "how to." This is a story of employing great gaming ideas for improving the school experience for our special education learners, but to design a better game, we had to expand our understanding of the current game, rewards, and the unique culture of our school.

Context mattered. I will provide an overview of the community, its strengths, its troubles, and the special education programming before our changes—to clarify our unique context. This type of design is translatable for your school, but not directly. In describing our culture and the questions we asked, this more appropriately serves as a *template* for systems change.

The process of redesign was central to setting up a new "game" for students and communicating that design to adults in the building. This meant:

1. purposefully outlining a new approach to special education service delivery;
2. communicating and sharing language that served our goals; and
3. assuming that we would need to adjust and modify as we encountered issues along the way.

The result was the topic of this chapter: a "quest-based learning" program that we implemented and how we rolled it out. The following anecdotal stories attempt to capture the process and thinking behind the story of our school and the transformation that occurred. These stories also capture a snapshot of the significant cultural and educational transformations resulting from only a few, small, largely semantic, changes in design that we applied to our special education programming.

CONTEXT

Decades before I arrived, the small-town life had a rich history of friendly rivalries with neighboring towns, generations of consistent family support, community volunteering and leadership from the community, active parent groups, a strong school board, and a school that was the primary center of activity in town. The maintenance team was outstanding. If a window was broken, or a tile was out of place, it was fixed within a day. In many ways this rich history was still evident in the annual rhythm of high school sports and concerts, fund-raisers and fairs, and the politics of everyone knowing everyone else. In a Norman Rockwell way, the county fair, football opener, and the high school music concert still marked the change of seasons. This culture, however, was and still is changing.

Small towns started shrinking dramatically in the 1980s and '90s. This town had gone through a rough consolidation with two smaller neighboring towns. They were now part of the district but nearly exiled from active participation, or meaningful influence, with how the school would be run. The larger school mascot remained unchanged and friendly rivalries had become bitter. The consolidation process included socioeconomic overtones, too, as the two smaller towns were primarily farming communities and students from those communities were often immigrants (legal and illegal) who had come to do seasonal work on the farms. The newer families generally had longer bus rides (as the larger town kept all of its schools open and closed all of the smaller town schools) and had to swallow the idea of going to another school.

So the community was effectively split into camps: old and new, Anglo and Hispanic, rich and poor, established and transient. These divisions manifested in conflicts at the high school, including violent group fights, a suicide, and multiple weapons violations. In my first year, I confiscated two knives, one set of brass knuckles, a small box of bullets, and I had to deal with a student drawing a shotgun on another student over the weekend. Frankly, I was shocked at the level of animosity, fear, and warning signs of much more dramatic problems than confiscations. Many students were legitimately weary, and some of our special education students were terrified. When I arrived, I was the fifth principal in seven years to take the helm of what many felt was an embattled ship.

This is not to minimize that, overall, the community still had amazing traditions, values, and exceptional community participation. Parent conferences, for instance, were ironic to me because *most* teachers saw *most* parents every Friday night at *the game*. So if a student were missing work, the teacher could have the student sit on the bench next to the teacher while the JV team was on the field/court and the parent could make the student finish up on the car ride home. Parents would rally to bake sales, golf tournaments, or simply ask the generous local bar owner to ante up for new trophy cases, class supplies, and jackets for the debate team. This was, in fact, still a community that had all the advantages of the small town. It was just a community that was still sorting out how to include new members.

When the towns consolidated, those that had similar cultural conventions were, through time, eventually starting to work together and play together. The students (who fit in) were outstanding all around and effectively matured as well-rounded young adults: We had strong student leadership, athletes in the choir, singers shouting at games, and after-school and summer programming that led to a majority of students' getting an exceptional education and well-rounded life lessons. Garrison

Keillor *must* have visited at some point! He still says that "… all the children are above average." I was entering a community that had much to be proud of, and it was.

Still, the school and community had belief and hope that their school could, and should, be better than these divisions. This hope, however, was confronted by challenges. The first and most glaring problem was the dropout rate.

WHY DID OUR STUDENTS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL?

The school board gave me the directive to address the dropout rate among special education students. First, I wanted a better understanding the "players" and current "game" that was in place at the school. All games are in place for a reason. So, how was the game perceived? Were there any winners? What rules were in place already? So, to better understand, I started with learning the game myself. I spoke with the school board, mainstream teachers and students, and special education teachers and staff.

The School Board

School Board/Community Reasons for the Dropout Rate

When I asked the school board and people in the community what was causing the problems, they summarized the issue as:

1. ineffective school policies;
2. the need for better teacher professional development;
3. lack of understanding why anyone would want to drop out; and
4. the principal's ability to manage the school … again.

Teachers

Mainstream teachers, some of whom were decades into their practice, really had a hard time dealing with students whom they thought were too tired to work, passive, or not willing to put in the effort that was, traditionally, a reasonable expectation for all students who walked in their doors. Students had the responsibility to bring their supplies, show up on time, and be ready to learn. When more and more students started to arrive to class without a pencil, a bit late, falling asleep, and/or not listening to the teacher, the reasonable (and age-old) solution was to simply send them to the principal's office, where they would get a "good talking to." Teachers were practiced at their jobs and couldn't imagine these practices wouldn't eventually work—because they had been so effective in the past.

Teacher Solutions for the Dropout Rate

So when I met the teachers, they consistently stated that we needed to:

1. coddle students less;
2. make fewer "accommodations" for students;
3. demand higher concern from students with clear, consistent consequences for deviant behavior;
4. get a principal who can keep better and more consistent discipline; and
5. improve the practice of the special education teachers.

Students

Mainstream students painted a correlating picture of themselves as "good kids" and those on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as "those kids." Many were aware of a population of kids who were believed to be just choosing to not be involved. The mainstream students also believed the "spec'd" (short for special education) kids were the cause of most of the behavior issues at the school. In truth, a small number of students on IEPs *were* actually responsible for many of the schoolwide behavior issues, but only a small percentage of them. The danger in this was the attitude of "us/them" that pervaded school stereotypes both ways. Special education was not integrated; it was a social category and an active *identity* for those in it. The reality was a system and a culture in which some students wished others were not in the school and the other students "did not care" and believed the school would be better off without them.

I started by talking to the students with IEPs. Some of them had behavior problems, but most did not. Those students would often ask me to visit their town—as a test of my interest in them. They wanted me to see their world, and I noted that their world was far away from my building. Others complained that they had to look "at the same four walls all school day long!"—because they did. While most mainstream kids played in organized clubs or teams after school, these kids, regardless of ability or challenge, met at the park when they got off the bus and played there. They never really saw, or got to know, their fellow students, so they didn't get the same invitation/pressure to join the team or try out for the club. To them, the idea of "trying harder" meant more effort with the same results of not passing a class or getting kicked out of class for forgetting a pencil—even when they had their books.

Student Reasons for the Dropout Rate

They reported a very different set of potential causes for the dropout rate. They dropped out because:

1. some hated school;
2. some feared school because of bullying and fighting; and
3. some just wanted to start working and had found opportunities, but they were *all* leaving.

Student Solutions for the Dropout Rate

When asked, the students simply could not imagine that their actions and efforts might be part of what makes a day good or not; instead they pointed out some changes they would like to see:

1. better teachers;
2. more engaging topics;
3. consistent treatment of students (with suspicion of racism); and
4. fewer cliques at the school.

Ambitious students among these started to work on their GRE test prep during study halls, and some enrolled in online schools. Others were just developing exit plans for "When I turn 16 …" and comparing them as incidental conversations. Sadly, dropping out was becoming part of this student subculture. Students dropped out because they wanted *anything* other than their lives at school; the game was no longer worth playing because they "knew" they were the "losers."

Special Education Teachers and Staff

When I arrived, we had three special education rooms, one for each full-time teacher. The first room was for math "pullout" (removal from mainstream courses) and students "acting out" (managed by the only male special education teacher); the second was primarily language arts pullout classes; and the third room was for all-day pullouts of students who had one-to-one paraprofessional aides working with them, or "high-needs" students.

This last room had a small lunch table, a bathroom, and the higher-needs students who were generally joyful and fun to be around. A fourth room was not officially for special education, but the in-school suspension (ISS) room consistently had one or more IEP students in attendance. These rooms were, for many students in special ed, essentially a quiet place completely isolated from the rest of the school and its culture. The majority of IEP students were pulled out of class for three or more hours per day. So, whether special education students were or were not in trouble, they were rarely found in mainstream classes.

Finally, it is important to point out that the three special education teachers unquestionably cared for these students (loved them even) and did everything in their power and expertise to provide a safe, nurturing, and comfortable space for them. Meeting any of them made it clear that they were actively doing everything in their power to help these students. When asked about the school, they knew their own hearts and efforts and simply could not connect that their programming was part of the problem.

Special Education Teachers' Reasons for School Challenges

Instead they pointed to:

1. the mainstream teachers' "intolerance" of their students;
2. the lack of administrative support;
3. he community bias; and
4. disinterested parents' encouraging the older students (especially boys) to come work on the farms for extra money.

In addition, they believed that they knew the "law" because they had gone to in-service training sessions, taken classes, and were tuned into best practices, yet across the state other teachers interpreted that law very differently and hosted very different programs. The pattern of pullout was eschewed elsewhere but embraced here based on a mythos of what the law said or did not say. I could not help but think that they were mixing in as much hearsay as actual legal obligations, and that they were using their position to quiet any conversation about other options for the children. They were dominating the game of school with a set of arbitrary and unclear rules. Clarifying the rules was a good place to start making a playable game for all. We needed to commonly understand what experience we were currently offering students, and what we all wanted to offer them within the law.

Because of a system with stakeholders who all had reasons for the way they felt, the special education program had filled with students who were primarily members of poor immigrant families from the smaller towns and who were also tired of fighting with teachers who didn't understand them. It was easy to see that the problems leading to high dropout rates were deeply seated, cultural, economic, and sadly predictable.

Among students receiving special education services via an Individual Education Plan (IEP), *all* of them dropped out when they turned 16. All of them. This is an indicator of a system, or game, that is poorly designed. My interviews confirmed the primary challenge given to me by the school board and superintendent when I arrived. As a lifetime gamer, I saw this as a clear indicator that the "game" was broken. Next, I took a much closer look at our special education programming and how the system was played.

Knowing we needed to change as an organization and actually making changes are two very different propositions. Each stakeholder group was willing to acknowledge issues and equally ready to point elsewhere for the solution. As a community we *all* saw a problem that required changes to solve it. Who needed to make the changes was the sticking point. For my part, it was not an option to alienate children any longer. Blaming others was not building new culture, it was reinforcing old culture. We needed to alter our idea of what a "good student" was, what growth looked like, and how we would handle students when they did not look like the ones we had been used to over the last 20 years of otherwise outstanding practice. We had to change the culture and to do so we had to have a common understanding of the realities and effect of the current practices.

IDENTIFYING THE GAME

First, we had to recognize that the act of coming to school each day was a complex system fully loaded with "rules," "permissions," and "personalities"—each played out differently for different stakeholders. School is a shared experience with a common set of rules toward a common goal, but when the goal isn't clear, the "game" changes for players who are reacting to the system, not the goal. For instance, pulling students out of class for extra help seems to be a good thing to adults. Yet we knew from our "players" that it meant something very different within the "game."

Being labeled as needing special education services meant more to these students than getting assistance with a disability—it mean a social status change among their peers; it meant being "one of those kids," socially alienated, or "dumb." An IEP meant that they were about to be pulled out more and more—in front of their peers. So it threatened a change in social grouping, and *everyone* in the school had a negative identity ready to ascribe to an IEP education student.

Students described that then, when pulled out, they could simply choose to *not* work, and work would eventually go away because they had a label to blame: "I can't do math, I'm EBD." This was a game to them too. Watching adults get "all up in our grill" was a form of entertainment to some and well worth changing the goal of the game a bit. When they were tired of being "nagged" to work, they could misbehave and be sent to ISS, where they would at least get some peace and quiet for the day. This was their game. It was not a good game, nor a game system that had any benefits, but a game with rules, results, and strategies, well refined and shared among the students.

Teachers would even say, "That kid is just playing with us!" or "It's just a game to them." Ironically, their complaints were actually the accurate portrayal and understanding of what was happening. We *all* knew there was a game, but none of us liked playing a game with no winners—well, at least with no adult winners and with kids losing at life. The special education teachers needed a bit of pullout time to sort out how the current "game" actually was working *against* their goals—and to consider how to change the system to work *for* them.

We started with our data. At the start of the school year, I asked all three special education teachers to arrange for a substitute teacher for a full week on my budget. I asked them to work together to review each special education student's reading and math scores during his or her time as a student in our school. Then we matched that data to pullout IEP accommodations.[2] The consistent pattern for our school was clear to all four of us: that reading scores *decreased* through time in correlation to increased minutes in pullout environments. So, the more time they spent with special education teachers, the worse their scores got—not plateaued, not stagnant, but *worse*. This couldn't be blamed on the disability. These teachers honestly thought pullout was compassionate, helpful, but it was not; it was causing previous skill to atrophy through time. The cumulative data were clear: Pullout was a form of academic abuse without justification. Their kids were not just dropping out; they were getting less proficient and saving themselves from further damage to their reading and math scores.

One teacher began to cry.

I explained that it was unacceptable and unethical for us to continue with a program that hurt kids. They quietly agreed that this was the situation.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR CHANGE

What next? Where do you go from realization that decades of work was hurting the same kids you were dedicated to helping? The teachers had one week to invent a new system. I told them I would be back each day to answer questions, check in, and help in any way I could. Their job for the week was to redesign their special education program from the ground up.

As they started to consider a new program, I offered them an actual copy of federal and state special education laws. Much confusion around education law can occur when we fail to read the laws (and court briefs) for ourselves and leave our decision making to others. When we know the difference between what is mandated and what is not, we can work within the law and exercise our common sense at the same time. At the end of the day, we were compliant if we:

1. held IEP meetings with the right people at the table;
2. allowed everyone to have a voice in the meeting;
3. carried out the accommodations from the IEP in concert; and
4. maintained paperwork for the state.

Every other myth and construct was fair game at that point. We discussed that if they wanted to move students with IEPs back into the classroom, they would need to assure mainstream teachers of their primary concerns being legitimate and worthy of a little extra work for special education teachers. We handled each concern individually.

Addressing Teacher Concerns

First, mainstream teachers did not want to fudge grades, reduce expectations, or otherwise be dishonest in grading students differently. *Solution:* The special education teacher would take over all grading for IEP students. This meant the mainstream teacher would have *less* grading to do and could

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2. Actual data are not included here because they were gathered internally, not as part of an IRB-approved study for publication. In addition, publishing any kind of student scores is appropriately messy.

maintain grading standards he or she valued. In practice, this policy actually encouraged both parties to creatively think of other accommodations than reducing student workload.

Second, mainstream teachers felt alienated from IEP meetings because the special education teacher would say "the law" required a particular accommodation. *Solution:* Our practical rule was that teachers suggested accommodation strategies *first* in our IEP meetings and special education teachers were asked to adopt them unless they had a clear reason not to. The resulting IEPs were innovative, often required extra time from the mainstream teachers, and successfully eliminated most of the pullout activity.

Third, teachers were advocating for pullout because they simply "would *not* have disruptions in the classroom for the rest of the learners." *Solution:* If a student were disrupting or about to be a disruption, we would as quietly as possible get the student out of the environment. If not, he or she would stay in class. In practice, we started to identify triggers and cues for each student and all teachers started to help students "save face" by removing them from the room *before* conflict. Typically, they would work in the hallway or move their work to the special education teachers' office or classroom. This consequence was now daily; however, it not for the year and never part of an IEP plan. The same student could return the following day and choose to work hard in the mainstream classroom.

Changing the Game of School

Now that we had determined the changes we would make to our special education program, we had to address the school-wide culture of understanding student learning and growth. We needed an operational framework that would guide our language, our attitude, our understanding, and give a positive option to the negative culture around special education. We tested three tools that would effectively foster a new system and new practices. For each we identified a game mechanic (or interaction) that wasn't working, what experience we wanted to see happen in the school, and considered how we could verbalize a new "game rule" that would communicate a new game mechanic that we thought would work better and change the game we were playing.

We used three phrases to communicate new ways of thinking about teaching and learning across the school. These helped to set a significantly different tone around who we were, who the students were, and what our purpose was in the school—and we repeated them every chance we could. These were essentially our "game rules" of play for teachers and students. If they wanted to play in the new system, they needed to justify their moves and strategies within the rules of the new game: "No labels"; "Want to/How to"; and "Celebrate growth." These effectively were an *intentional* shift in discourse in order to show others how to play school. We were telling them how to play. Later in the chapter, I'll explain that each rule had unforeseen positive results.

Discourse Rule 1: "No Labels, Just Learning"

Although labels are used in the special education profession, medical language, and legal documentation, we believed they were not useful for teaching and learning. If students knew they had a particular cognitive disorder, this reality didn't change their need to find their way in the world. But our students were using these labels, with minimal understanding, to justify a list of things they

"couldn't" do. I noticed that adults were also excusing themselves from teaching and using the labels to justify their choices.

Broken Game Mechanic

In fact, our understanding of "struggle" was skewed. We were perceiving struggle as "bad" and our collective decision avoided struggles using pullout, suspension, and overly reduced or modified work. In the literature, it made sense that those with special needs also had to work hard to overcome, accommodate, or creatively solve difficulties, not just avoid them. Yet many of our students would look at struggle and walk away from it *with their label as rationale*, even when the struggle had nothing to do with their disability.

The Experience We Wanted

We had to create language and actions that embraced struggle and assumed that diagnosed disabilities would not necessarily excuse reasonable work and struggle to complete it. Like in a game setting, we had to embrace failure, or struggle, as expected ("That's not worthy of a reaction"), valuable ("We learn from mistakes only if we have them"), and even fun ("It wouldn't be worth your time if it were easy!"). Language games, in general, are effective at constructing playful new contexts in play; likewise, at school, these were essentially constructing new realities for failure and effort each time we repeated them. This applied to labels, too.

We decided we would combat "label excuses" by not using the labels in the first place. Likewise, some of our kids "struggled with focus" (not ADD, or attention deficit disorder), some of them had to "learn tricks to calm down" (not EBD, or emotional behavioral disorder), others had "gifts that needed balance or direction" (not OCD, or obsessive compulsive disorder). Reshaping our language established a consistent values system and sent a clear message to all of our students that the adults were ready, and making an effort, to change. Most kids picked up on the language too and began to use it. No longer could they say, "I'm ADHD," implying that they *couldn't* focus; instead they "struggled," which implied they could focus but needed to try harder.

Nor did we run from proper medical language. We agreed that we would use labels to communicate between adults what the child's special need was, but only when we had to. Then we would take that label and put it away. When we addressed students in IEP meetings we worked to transform our language. We replaced all acronyms and labels with "struggles," "worthy struggles," and "solutions." One example is the letter we sent home to all parents of students on IEPs that we would be changing our programming.

The word crafting was a key to shifting attitudes and school culture. IEPs were indeed a legal obligation, but "helping" and "caring" were our professional dispositions and they came first. We needed to see IEPs as a valuable process that we would do for *any* student who was struggling. We agreed that IEP meetings were not just an obligation, but the *right* thing to do for the child. In the end, we actually *increased* accommodations made overall by using smaller, smarter, and more targeted changes around the student. We also got hooked on seeing results; the results made the wordsmithing worth the effort.

The New Rule

No labels, just learning. Labels were useless. Learning led to success, self-confidence, and lifetime benefits. As members of our special education staff were now in mainstream classrooms (instead of pullout settings), they were available to *all* students who had a question. Our teachers likewise naturally began to teach *all* students—not "good kids" and "spec kids," just kids. It cannot be understated that the new system, or game, required not only students, but also teachers and staff, to learn the new rules.

Complex systems rarely change with only one stakeholder's participation; the shift has to be systemic. Key stakeholders need to speak the same language to reinforce the student experience. Games with *overly* complex rule systems, obscure language, or that use excessive "insider" discourse can create barriers for novice players. Mainstream gaming may have complex systems, but they are more successful when all the players can learn to speak the same language and play on equal footing. Understanding challenges is scaffolded through time, starting with simple and direct languages and challenges. Careful attention to our game language allowed us to refocus the game goals on overcoming, not avoiding, challenges.

Discourse Rule 2: "You Provide the 'Want To,' We Provide the 'How To'"

The bulk of our special education students were able to learn, but they had to be willing to work at it. Our strategy was to work at ignoring nonengaged students' "gaming" us and actively get excited when we saw any effort to game *with* us. Essentially, we relied on human desire for attention to introduce a new game mechanic to our students. They had to provide the "want to," and we had to be ready to respond, engage, and provide the "how to."

Broken Game Mechanic

We concluded that "forcing" children to work was not working. Telling them to learn was not the same as learning. Punishing students for missing work wasn't necessarily getting the work done. Nor was rewarding students the same as seeing them mature and choose their own self-improvement.[3] Students reported mild amusement at how much the adults got "worked up over a stupid worksheet." Indeed, all these efforts were actually amounting to was our own raised stress. The data showed that the entire system was not leading to student learning.

The Experience We Wanted

So we chose to stop forcing students to do schoolwork. This was initially a hard sell because it sounded as if we were giving up. However, we were not; we believed that internal motivation was more powerful and sustained than external motivation. To persist in policing schoolwork was exhausting and ineffective. We were actually shifting our efforts to reacting to the positive we saw in kids versus the negative. Refusal to do work was a reaction, not a disability. But what were they reacting to? Was the work too hard? Was it fun to see the adult get upset? Was this a way to get more attention? We really never found answers to these questions; we just ended the pattern. If students would give us the honor and gift of effort, we would engage with them. If not, we ignored them and

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3. Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards* was instrumental for me and others in this line of thinking.

made sure they didn't disrupt the efforts of others. If they would provide the "want to," we would be ready with the "how to." We would often deliver the "how to" in the form of smaller challenges or "quests" that we knew would help overcome the challenge.

Learning, for us, had to be an internal experience. We knew that if a student tried, he or she would eventually improve accuracy and quality of work. So, we intentionally began to "reward" effort with a smile and word of encouragement—regardless of academic success. Our work wasn't academic in these cases; it was character or "heart" work on the child. The child needed attention and we could choose how we gave it. This was more important than any worksheet, test, or essay, and it was central to the entire character of our school.

We reviewed each adult role and discussed new strategies that were consistent. As a principal, in most discipline situations, I would lead with "Were you trying?" as my first question. If not, the student could sit quietly without a lecture (and I could get back to paperwork). If so, we would spend the next hour role-playing new strategies for the situation and I would send the student back to class the next day with a "quest" that I would share with his or her adviser to follow up on. If the student succeeded, the adviser would tell me and I would make it a point to catch the child in the hallway to say, "Well played!"

Our suspension supervisor was told to allow students to put their heads down and sleep rather than forcing them to work all day. If the students wanted help, however, they were to pull up a chair, laugh, encourage failure, and lighten the mood in the room with music. Our teachers were given permission to simply walk away from any student who wasn't trying (as long as the student wasn't bothering others). This was a challenge for many teachers, but the result was less stress and the students' alienating *themselves*. It took away the student accusation that the teacher was "picking on them." Those in our special education staff were relieved to have me tell them that if students didn't provide the "want to," then they were not only able to walk away, but they were actually expected to do so. This initially freed up considerable time for them to work with the kids who wanted help. We contrasted the individual with our collective and consistent will to help: "*You* provide the "want to," and *we'll* provide the "how to.""

Students at first thought this new idea was a joke. Many who were used to old patterns spent entire days saying, "I just don't 'want to' today!" However, when the fight disappeared (we let them relax), the rebellion did not seem as … rebellious. In fact, relaxing is actually a bit boring. Other students would just shake their heads and keep working. After one week, the broken games just ended, primarily because the game required two players. As adults, we could choose not to play that game.

For instance, instead of focusing on students who were not working, I would start with those who were working well. As a principal, when I visited classrooms to check on students, I'd start by asking active students what they were working on, praise effort, and joyfully recognize innovative thinking (not "mistakes"). I would sometimes deliberately stop by literally every desk, and then arrive at the desk of the student not working and lean in to whisper quietly, "You provide the want to, and we'll provide the how to." This meant simultaneously that "we care enough to give you your independence and respect it, *and* we will move mountains when you show up ready to play." The effects were not immediate, but they were positive and consistent.

So, for every special education student, his or her family, and our faculty and staff, we stopped investing time on power struggles with students who were resisting work, and we agreed that this would be the language we'd consistently use whenever a student was having a bad day, being lazy, or just looking for attention using negative behavior. In parent meetings, they would complain, "I can't get my child to do anything at home!" And we would agree! In truth, we can force only compliance or obedience, but we simply cannot force effort. They would say, raising their voices a bit, "Surely, you are the experts; you should know how to get my kid to learn!" And we would say, "Yes, we know 'how to' learn, but your kid has to 'want to' learn."

The more we said it, the more the philosophy spread. Instead of fighting combative kids, we just chose to say, "You provide the 'want to,' and we'll provide the 'how to,'" and move on. It was letting go of the *least* favorite part of our jobs, and seeing *better* outcomes. Games with unclear directions are frustrating and hard to play for everyone, and the only winners are those who like aggravation. This rule made the goal crystal clear. All a student had to do to get our collective attention was to "try" at whatever his or her challenge was that day. Simple.

Discourse Rule 3: "Every Change in Habit and Action Requires Effort, Heart, and Character, and We Will Celebrate When We See It"

Our third tactic was really an attitude adjustment for the adults involved. While "how to/want to" was how we handled students, "change = celebrate" was a guiding principle for us. At the center of this was a revisualization of special education. We pulled from gaming discourse the term *questing* as a more accurate word for these smaller, individualized goals. Each student in special education should have a clear "quest" he or she was on that had to do with lifetime growth and development.

In fact, this became so central to our communications with mainstream teachers and parents that we drew it up and used a staircase-like graphic (see Figure 1) that, once seen, began to shape all following conversation and planning for *all* of our students. We used this at all profile meetings and started to use it even for our mainstream students in counseling sessions preparing them for college applications. We even joked that we should add a third flight for teacher professional development.

Broken Game Mechanic

Instead of seeing "mainstream" and "spec'd" students, we really needed to present and agree on an understanding of human learning that was progressive and that *everyone* was learning—even teachers. Every person had learning goals that needed to be clarified and encouraged toward a lifetime journey. We needed a visual re-representation of what learning was, and incidentally, what the "end game" was for the school experience. Our solution was to simply show that the "game" was to climb the staircase—for *all* students. The final quests were to be excellent, independent, and helpful. These served as authentic goals that anyone could respect, not just within the scope of completing a worksheet, but in life; the game was big, and the stakes were worthy.
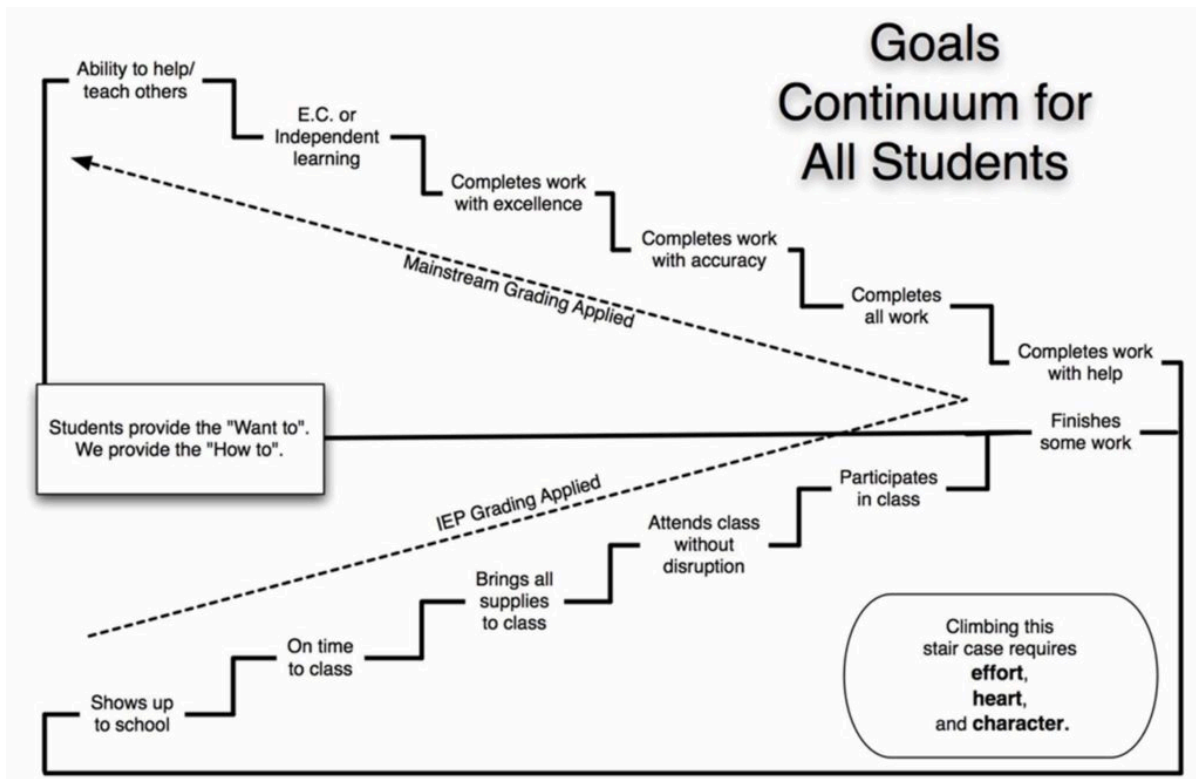
Figure 1. The "staircase" became part of our IEP meetings and student files to communicate goals for growth.

The Experience We Wanted

This visual allowed us to move forward on two key sticking points. Something about having a clear visual made the philosophy "real" for us and easy to use when thinking about program changes. This also created something like game rules that could be agreed on by all parties. Once the rules were clear, we could start to play.

Excusing or adapting work was commonly referred to as "dumbing down" learning for our students with special needs.[4] This graphic helped to clarify that we had common goals as educators, but we had different students at different places on the "staircase." When we had a student skipping school, then the accuracy of the work was not a smart place for us to put our attentions. So instead of asking them for missing work, it was simply more appropriate to say, "Welcome to school; we are glad you got here today!" Teachers could digest removal of work if they knew that we were all expecting them to be fully academic at some point in the future. In addition, when we met and could see students climbing, it was easier to get excited for them.

This provided a clear definition of what special educators were responsible for and what mainstream teachers were responsible for with a clear progression that we all agreed on. The staircase implies equitable "climbing" and effort at all levels, and it also implies that accommodations had an ending point. If we identified a student as being on the lower stairs, we knew that special education would be the ones marking the grade book for that student. No mainstream teachers were ever asked to "dumb

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4. Having enjoyed J. T. Gatto's Dumbing Us Down, I was disappointed in this misinterpretation of an otherwise rational critique of schools' lowering academic expectations for all students. Gatto calls attention to overly didactic learning approaches that do not address the whole person, creativity, and original thinking.

down" their standards again. In fact, the staircase implied that they should level up their expectations for advancing students and give them opportunities for challenge, too. Each step provided a clear "quest" for each student as long as we could identify where the learner was. Some teachers began to play with independent studies, having students help teach, lead groups, and do field trips for learning. Most significantly, we started to see teachers offload after-school study groups to students who wanted extra credit.

Even in clear cases in which the disability was permanent (e.g., hearing loss) we wanted to teach the student to:

1. advocate for him- or her self;
2. make his or her own accommodations; and
3. use resources on his or her own to help learn.

We wanted our older senior students to help (top of the chart) younger students with disabilities that they shared, but that the seniors had learned to accommodate for. Students helping with instruction helped them to understand and grow together, it modeled a growth mind-set, and it gave hope to younger students that they would get through (if not over) their current struggles too.

The New Rule

In general, if you want kids to act a certain way, simply wait for them to do so and get excited when they do. Notice the use of "mainstream" and "IEP" were in reference to grading only, not identity. Grading simply determined which adult was doing assessment. All students learn, and we had a framework that reinforced a kind of hope for students to grow out of "spec'd" status into maturity, achievement, and helpfulness.

Every teacher, every IEP parent, and every staff member got a copy of the staircase and we went over it together in a staff meeting. We were going to play a game that actually had winners in it. Whether they agreed with it or not was not as important as coming to a common understanding of how and why we were making all of the above decisions about programming and services. We were *going* to change, we knew how we were going to do it, and we would celebrate anyone who was onboard. If the new game worked, the results would follow.

IMPLEMENTATION AND REFINEMENT

The new game of school had significant impact on our community, but I need to share a few disclaimers before sharing the results. These results are anecdotal memories, as we were designing and implementing rather than thinking about data collection at the time. None of the data are publicly available and were collected as part of normal school operations (not under an institutional review board, or IRB, approval). That said, this case narrative is ripe for replication as a formal study.

That said, we didn't think to gather proper data, but we did collect data that were relevant measures of our own success as a form of local action research. Dropout rates were only a final measure. We also tracked attendance, reading scores, formal and informal conversations with stakeholders, open-enrollment data, course-enrollment choices, class participation, progress on quests, voluntary

after-school time, extracurricular enrollment, school-to-work data, behavior data, and community perceptions, including tracking news coverage of the school.

Another consideration of the results below is that not everyone was able to "get on board" with the new discourse tools and game rules. As I tell the story, it comes from the perspective of an administrator who had a team of simply outstanding educators who were war weary and ready for change—and I focus on the positive elements. Not all schools have the kind of faculty and staff that I largely enjoyed, nor were we completely able to persuade everyone within our school to play the new game. Just because I chose and choose to ignore the negative minority does not mean it did not exist or exert some influence in the narrative. In two cases in particular, I had to use the office of the principal to compel teachers to comply with new IEP agreements after they had agreed to them in the meetings. Overall, those who were willing to build a new game did, and we willfully ignored adults who were not—just like we did with the kids.

In the meantime, we decidedly changed our school. Below are memories of what happened next and narratives that our community embraced to "tell our story" to anyone who would listen outside of the school. Within the constraints above, I think you'll find the results to be idea generating, inspirational, and an indication that the game *can* be changed.

The "pencil trigger," for example, was one of our solutions that seemed *obvious after* we changed the game, but that just eluded us beforehand. Stories like this and the resulting changes came strikingly quickly (within one year!) after we shared a common foundation and set of "rules" to work with. Once we started playing differently, we saw a culture of "players" emerge, not just from students but from the teachers who were also part of the game. Likewise, we enjoyed a similar satisfaction when we had "players" enjoying the game we were creating for them. Each month we added "triggers" and "success stories" to our staff meetings so we could refine and improve the initial plan, and we found ourselves thinking like game designers. It is from these conversations that we noticed primarily that the new game was working. So first, the pencils, and then a collection of other observations retrieved from my old files, notes, and memories of an amazing new game.

The Pencil Trigger

Early in implementation, as we integrated students back into the mainstream classrooms, we noticed that a common trigger for an outburst or conflict between student and teacher was *forgetting a pencil* for class. Pencils were a valued commodity at our school and forgetting them was a "move" that students were making in the old game.

The pencil solution was to devalue them completely. Pencils had too much power in the game—they were out of balance. So, instead of having teachers lose a pencil, or students lose a chance to work, or conflict over repeated offenses, we changed the value of the resource. I bought a veritable boatload of pencils and handed out *boxes* of them—"like handshakes at a rally." I carried a few with me in the hallways and offered them to forgetful students. We chose to keep entire boxes of *sharpened* pencils (eliminating idle time in ISS) at the entrance of every classroom. Pencils were *free* for any student to grab as he or she walked into the room.

When the supply of pencils increased, their value as a game tool dropped. Students lent them to each

other, teachers skipped the pencil problem happily, and pencils became positive pieces in the game, not negative. Now forgetfulness was less a problem and more a chance to show generosity. Students saw adults trying to solve a problem, and winning at it. Amusingly, this design change *alone* correlated with lower referral and detention rates for a variety of larger infractions that were stemming from the pencil trigger. Seeing how easily teachers could change the game, we were all ready for more.

Using the New Discourse

We began to integrate the staircase philosophy seamlessly into student meetings as "quests." We would, as a team, identify where we saw the student on the staircase (using the chart). This established a common understanding of the "level" where the student stood, and goals were self-evident within the clearly presented levels. ("What do you do at this level? You work for the next!"). The teachers would suggest what might encourage internal motivation to level up, while parents, admin, and the student would talk about quests that we were issuing to the student as a challenge that might require struggle on his or part.

Instantly the image of a staircase helped us all to *assume* that the goal was to climb within the student's capacity to do so. We also communicated that we understood that any growth would take character and a big heart. Effort, even failed effort, was a "win state" for us. So, once students accepted the quest ("want to"), we would tell them what we could do to help them ("how to")—they won when they tried, not when they tested. Naturally then, the inescapable testing was more a measure of the quests the *adults* designed than of the student. If students failed when they were trying, we needed to learn better "how to" for them.

Notice the lowest levels on the staircase. Returning to class was considered a game "privilege" on the "staircase." Within the year, more than 80% of our students had successfully "made it through a day" of full integration, then "made it through a week," and then forgot that non-disruptive behavior used to be a challenge. The reward was to be a "normal" kid again as much as possible. Using the student understanding of the old game, we could provide authentic and real opportunities that helped them stay in mainstream classrooms—and be part of the social game of school. Being back in mainstream classes was now perceived as a privilege that our IEP students saw as a new "way out" of their alienation. They just had to try to play a new game.

When and how they worked at school was part of their strategy, not ours. So we allowed them to suggest new strategies to deliver support. Many started to ask the special education teachers to check in with them only if they raised their hands (the stigma was still there), so the other students wouldn't think of them as special education. They would get help during study halls or after school. This language pervaded day-to-day communications, too. Once I heard a student ask another, "What quest are you working on?" Overall, the language mattered when we used it, and it established a new conversation about teaching and learning. We provided the rules, clear goals, and allowed students to develop and share tactics and strategies to level up.

Completing Quests

As the language of "leveling up" and "completing quests" grew, we also started to realize that our understanding of positive reinforcement was evolving. Many students, after years of "failure," were

seeing clear goals and finding they were able to successfully achieve them. For the first time, the game itself became worth playing. This cannot be understated. We had assumed we had to force compliance with students within the old game, but this might have been because we had so many frustrated players reacting to a bad game design. The new game was more playable, with clear strategies toward student specific goals such as being normal, getting smarter, learning social skills, and learning itself. These were all the reward we needed—the game of learning is much better than the game of school.

That said, mainstream digital games do more than this. Though games are fun to play all on their own, when you "win" or "level up" they often make the achievement an event within the game. Literally, designers show fireworks, play cheering audio, brag the player up socially, and introduce new challenges based on achievement. Play is fun, but having the computer reinforce that your play was well done is icing on the cake. In schools, we can add some icing too, but it requires work and effort on our part.

So when we saw that small or large "quests" were completed, the special education staff grew into and built a system that would track and ensure that we (collectively) reacted to effort and character on our players' part. When our "players" achieved, we chose to *always* prioritize our time to:

1. call home;
2. congratulate students publicly;
3. recognize they were showing character via grading; and
4. tell the principal.

We flipped time spent on negative behavior and spent it on the positive growth we wanted. Calls home were once dreaded events; now they were anticipated and students would tell parents to expect the calls. Public bragging is fun, sends the right message, and shows everyone in the room how to be a hero. Instead of public chastisement of "disruptive" behaviors (such as forgetting a pencil!), we chose to make it a point to appropriately disrupt class, hallways, and all school announcements with achievements. We attached growth to point systems across the school (with cooperating teachers) and made sure that achievement showed up in rubrics, extra-credit points, and ultimately grading systems designed to communicate growth to parents.

Finally, I'll admit I loved embarrassing students with loud, enthusiastic, joyful noise. At first, I incidentally heard about achievements from historically problematic students and made it a point to praise them. Interestingly, other students began to ask their special education teachers to make sure to tell me, too. Together the faculty decided to add this fourth "reward" so the game was fair to all students, and because I was "good at making them blush a bit." Together we made sure that the praise was appropriate and sensitive to particular student needs and quests—so sometimes I privately caught them in the hall to let them know quietly, "I'm watching your progress, and proud of you. Well done!" and sometimes I sang them a song from across a busy hallway. Both got the job done. Icing on the cake.

For me as a principal, this took five minutes max, but for the student, the results lasted all day. When I was out of town, if possible I would *call* the student. Soon, parents would mention how excited their child was that night. All *other* students in the room/hallway also saw the attention that character

change now garnered. Some would get a little extra by telling me when they got to school in the morning that "I'm on my last day!" of a weeklong quest.

A final outcome was that at the end of each semester the special education staff began to host reward dinners at which we would recognize the number of steps each student had climbed. No trinkets were involved (save some paper "certificates"), just verbal, public, and honest recognition of human growth and effort. At a few of these events, the special education teachers kept up that habit of shedding some tears—only this time for all the *right* reasons.

We had leftover trinkets from past reward systems that now collected dust because the authentic praise over actual character work was much more rewarding for all of us. We figured that both "games" required about the same amount of time and effort, but one was fun and one was … stressful. Instead of "discipline management," we found we were spending much more time on "design" and "celebration management"—to much greater effect. Office referrals all but disappeared (except for in the classrooms of two teachers who were notably sticking to the old game), saving me disciplinary time, frustration, and paperwork. Likewise, getting "in front" of problems is only part of the equation for special education teachers; the other part is building new, positive, lifetime learning challenges to replace the old game of school. One such design effort was the new Language Lab to accommodate new challenges for both special education and mainstream students.

The Language Lab

We never expected to rewrite the school's course offerings, but within a year of the new game we changed this. As we started to have special education students who wanted to try their hand at harder electives, we also began to review our scope of offerings at the school—and found them lacking a bit. We needed compelling, interesting, and even "fun" courses to replace pullout sessions and study halls that we had dwindling need for. So, each department began to build course offerings the following year. They pitched one exploratory course (often by combining or replacing decreasing study hall enrollment) and we began larger design discussions. The next school year, we began to offer electives, in each subject area, that were designed to be inviting to students with unique interests—both introductory and advanced. The most successful of these additions to the curriculum was the ability to take a foreign language.

For language learning, we partnered with Rosetta Stone to have a fully online "Language Lab," led by our French teacher (instead of a study hall). We started offering 29 languages using computer-based instruction and human supervision. This required a union-level vote (two, actually), public demand fostered by a newspaper article, and testimony from students who needed particular languages. One simply wanted to talk with her Polish-speaking grandmother, others wanted to enter the military speaking basic Arabic (often avoiding frontline hazards through having this skill), and some simply wanted to speak the same Spanish language that 15% of their fellow students spoke at home.

Changing language learning, from a "have to" for college-bound students to a "get to" for anyone who might want to learn a new language, actually worked. We expected a few more students to be able to transfer in Spanish credits and get a second year, but we didn't expect the Language Lab to get the kind of buzz that it did among students.

In the end, we saw enrollment shift from a small number of college-bound students taking a language to more than 80% of our students total—including a number of special education students who found themselves especially adept at language learning; for them this was a welcomed "break from worksheets and math." It hit home for me when a teacher at an IEP meeting suggested taking a language as an *accommodation* strategy to "do something different for an hour and *have some fun* [Italics mine] learning with a different part of their brain." If just one new offering could have this kind of effect, what more could we do across the curriculum?

A New Curriculum

Notice also that our mainstream teachers were having fun embracing innovative classes such as Brain Teasers, Anatomy, The History of War, British Literature, Computer Animation, Pottery, Caring for Your Car, Quilting and Design, and Criminal Law (see Table 1). These were largely project-based, intelligent, lifetime-learning classes. In addition, they added classes that fed health-care, farming, and education professions (our top regional employers) for easier school-to-work transitions. Our teachers not only embraced the chance to make new "games" to play, but they helped to ramp it up to a whole new level. As long as enough students brought the "want to," we would offer the course.

Two reactions come from the new curriculum: First, there's the impact of returning faculty to their subject-area teaching assignments (versus having them serve the shrinking demand for study hall, ISS, and pullout courses). Second, teachers *like* their work and have selected to teach a subject because they *love* their subject area. Just a quick survey of the yellow "new" courses (see Table 1) shows the imagination, relevance, and talent of the faculty in this school.

This a *repressed* resource in schools, not an emergent one unique to my school. Teachers quickly identified what they loved. When given permission to create a class that manifested their passions, they spent their time to align each course with state standards. What can be more fun than making a new class that captures the spirit of what helped you fall in love with your subject area? I wonder still: What designs already exist in schools across the country that simply are not accessed because leaders cannot imagine a new game or make room for innovation?

When the nuts and bolts of scheduling hit, we ultimately offered students a paper *Course Offerings* book and had them request and prioritize classes for us. Not all of the classes generated interest, but many did. Consequently, teachers were able to align their design instincts with student response in an authentic way. Where students, or our energetic guidance counselor, filled classes, teachers were "rewarded" with a class prep that *they* designed and a semester of a subject that was near to their hearts. When the subject had no student interest, we shelved it for next year. The result was a larger set of offerings with no additional faculty needs.

Table 1. **Mapping a new high school curriculum: Catalogs added playful courses.**

Subject	Existing Courses	Redesigned Courses	New "Fun" Courses
Mathematics	7th Grade, 8th Grade, Algebra I & II, Integrated I, II, & III, Geometry	College Probability & Statistics, College Algebra and Geography, College Calculus, College Trigonometry, Vocational/ Consumer Math	Logic, Brain Teasers, Applied Statistics, ACT/ SAT Math Prep
Science	Life Science, Earth Science, Physical Science, Biology, Environmental Science, Chemistry, Material Science, College Chemistry, Medical Terms	Physics, Anatomy, Physiology, First Aid	
Social Studies	Geography, American History, Political Science, World History	College Government, Economics, Sociology, Psychology, College Psychology	History of Athletics, Local History, The History of War, Cultural Readings, History of Rock-and-Roll
Language Arts	7th Grade, 8th Grade, College English	Composition, Creative Works, Reading Comprehension, Great Works, Mentorship	Communication/Speech, Drama, Mythology, Poetry, World Literature, American Literature, British Literature, Shakespeare
Digital Tech		Intro to Computers, Web Design & Marketing	Keyboarding/Word Processing, Computer Applications, Desktop Publishing, Word & PowerPoint, Spreadsheet Concepts, Intro to Video Production, Advanced Video Production, Senior Video Production, Computer Animation
Art	7th Grade, 8th Grade, Art I, College Drawing and Design, College Color & Design		Drawing, Sculpture, Pottery, Painting Oil, Water, & Acrylic
Industrial Technology	Small Engines, Welding I & II, Construction Skills, CAD, Auto Repair I & II, Woodcrafting, Advanced Woodcrafting		Home Projects, Electronics, Caring for Your Car, Introduction to the Trades, Work Mentorship, Scale Modeling
Family & Consumer Science	7th Grade, 8th Grade, Fashion/Clothing/Textiles, Marketing, Graphic Embroidery, Mentorship	Creative Foods, Foreign Foods, Crafts/Quilting, Independent Living & Family, Education	Basic Foods, Basic Sewing, Lifetime Crafts, Child Development
Business & Law	Accounting I & II	Personal Finance	Career Investigation, Intro to Law, Management & Leadership, Business Law, Criminal Law, E-Business, Education/Family Law
Music	Band, Choir		
Foreign Languages	French I & II		Language Lab (29 Rosetta Stone Options)
Physical Education	7th Grade, 8th Grade, 9th Grade, Fitness		Weight Training, Endurance Building, Group Games, Life Sports

Finally, we did see a small bump in open-enrollment students from neighboring districts who had heard about a course that was relevant to their career goals.[5] Ironically, courses in education, farming,

5. Minnesota students can enroll in any district they wish as long as the district has openings and the student is willing to provide his or her own transportation to the school. State funding follows the student.

and medicine (again, our three *top* regional employers!) were hard to find in schools. So the appearance of these options created interest and conversation around the community.

Activity, or the "verbs," of school design are essential to any consideration of the game of school. What gets done is essentially what any game has to appeal to players; the rest is external to the joy of playing the game. Learning is enjoyable, deeply satisfying, and worthy of our time. If we have students who are not attracted to learning, we need to wonder not how to force them to learn, but what *we* are doing that so repulses people from such a wonderful thing. In this case, we asked teachers to dream and imagine and reacquaint with their first love. Games can be social events, too. When they are, we invite players to join us in learning and playing them. So for our school, the new classes helped to shape how we talked about, recruited players, and connected with students with shared interests. Learning wasn't a static, permanent canon of predictable classes; it could also be alive and worthy of our passion, work, and effort.

Color Coding the Library

In addition, reading levels increased. With new classes, new topics, and new languages, our librarian saw the effect of increased traffic for special-interest books. Also, we encouraged students to read a book for a while when they were frustrated with course work; this was an upgrade to just "putting their heads down on the desk" and in a few cases we made it a quest to swap one for the other. Consequentially, library checkouts increased. Students started to line up at the librarian's desk to get recommendations or the answer to "How hard is this book to read?" Quickly, the librarian was asking for help to manage the increased traffic—what I call a "good problem." So we found a student assistant to help with traffic. We also assigned a high-level student who wanted to quest toward "helpfulness" on the staircase to put colored stickers inside the front cover of every book in the library based on the book's reading level. We color coded the library and students could discreetly pick out their own reading level. In game terms, this allowed players to make their own choices, made the difficulty level clear to the player, and encouraged them to physically grab and open a book before they got the "cheat" information. In school terms, we solved the good problem with a good solution. We were learning new design strategies as a result of a better game being played outside the library.

Overall, among all of the other changes, energy, and mainstreaming practices, our test scores returned the following year with clear growth in reading and math scores. We were still watching the test scores of our special education students especially because they had been *declining* in the previous years. Without forcing extra reading, mandating reading recovery, or hiring a reading specialist, we just gave key information to students at exactly the right moment in the game (selecting a book). The result was that instead of the declining reading scores of the past, the next year's test scores showed that *on average* our special education students increased *two reading levels* in a single school year and *no* students regressed.

A few students actually increased a full *four* reading levels that year. These students were regulars in the library, reading all sorts of books, and actively using the color coding to select books they could continue to find success with—and they found reading to be internally rewarding. They were also pursuing "being normal" in mainstream classrooms and putting amazing effort into that goal. While many readers fall in love with reading in elementary years, these students just needed the game's difficulty to be turned down a bit so they could learn better. Teachers who set rules around topics, not

particular books, gave their students and our librarian a key opportunity to set up achievable goals and renewed growth. Giving them control and praising their new passion was natural, simple, and affordable.

Increased Extracurricular Involvement

Extracurricular participation increased in two ways. First, teachers who were invested in promising the "how to" were welcoming more and more students after school who wanted to succeed in class. In addition, they were encouraging student leaders to provide service help as tutors. Across student groups, these partnerships resulted in friendships (and positive social pressure!) that ultimately encouraged students to consider and join sports and clubs, or at least to attend school events.

Second, when special education students returned to mainstream classrooms, into which many of them quickly blended in, they were able to hear general education teachers talk about "the game," or hear invitations to clubs in class. As a school we realized that much of the promotion for these activities came from one-to-one relationships that coach/teachers formed with students in their classrooms. If the student were pulled out, the relationship could never form.

For example, once in an IEP meeting, when the football coach saw the "staircase" he pointed out that joining the team could be the next "quest" for one of our larger young men. Quests could facilitate more than just academic growth. The rest of the team agreed, and the young man made the JV team as a sophomore—before doing the full load of mainstream work in classes. Traditionally, a student had to have success in class before joining a team. Letting a low-performing student play in sports was "sending the wrong message," yet for the students, it seemed punitive and punishing in a way that took many special education students out of positive experiences for entire seasons at a time.

We found that, more important, playing on a team had less to do with academic success and more to do with effort, heart, and character. If students were providing the "want to" each day in class (a key game rule here!), they were welcome to join teams on which they would learn even more "how to" lessons, build adult relationships, and enjoy successes. If students didn't perform, we had the freedom to pull them out of extracurriculars for the day, not the entire season. If students missed work, we had them make it up immediately and had varsity players help them get it done when possible. Coaches were encouraged to bench players who missed practices, but not necessarily to cut them. Likewise, nonathletic programming had consequences that were immediate and appropriate, but not final and excluding. The game had to have hope and a clear path to success.

With each success story, we were able to establish that extracurricular participation was an asset that helped growth. Athletic activity particularly, or lack of it, was part of the student's condition, energy level, and ability to focus. These were more accurately part of the game, not the reward for playing or a separate element altogether. As game designers, we better conceived how time outside of school could be used within the game of learning. Why would we take away those key benefits when students were otherwise giving it their all in the classroom? Further, as teachers embraced this, we talked about it intentionally. My records show this became an agenda item at one monthly staff meeting: "More special education students joining extracurriculars!"

All of these results came about after simply changing and verbalizing the three rules outlined above.

Each of these rules successfully changed the school in different ways. They are woven into the outcomes above, but they also provided some unexpected experiences that compose what Paul Harvey would call "the rest of the story." Our faculty, the students, and I were "playing" within a new environment with new rules. Capturing the in-game experience is the rest of the story.

THE REST OF THE STORY:

"No Labels, Just Learning"

As adults, we generally change our own language, but the labels that are so ingrained in special education discourse did not disappear entirely. Language is hard to change. The effect was still noticeable. Our intention was to treat children as children first, and do what we could to forget labels when we were engaged in teaching and learning. Mainstreaming efforts did meet with success for the vast majority of our special education students.

In addition, our special education teachers were also mainstreamed. We didn't expect that pulling out students also had an effect on the perception of the faculty, who were by default pulled out of our mainstream classrooms too. When they returned to classrooms, without labels but as "co-teachers" or "helpers," the result was an increase in "help" that students received in classes without having an IEP. The extra adult in the room was a clear bonus for all students. Teachers could bounce ideas and lessons off another adult. All students could ask for help and our special education staff had no qualms about helping anyone or adding one or two students to the small group in the back of the room during work time. If students wanted help, we helped them.

As students fluidly moved in and out of review and help sessions, we discussed that the labels just were not useful. Instead, teachers would say, "Anyone who wants to go over that lesson one more time can go sit with Mrs. [Helper] in the back; the rest of you can start working on your homework now."

Another observation from the special education teachers was that they perceived their special education students were getting *more* help in the mainstream setting than they were in pullout. They noted that with less of a stigma, and with mainstream students modeling how to ask for help, they were learning the social skill of asking for help apart from their labels. Asking for help wasn't a fault, or a sign of stupidity—it was a skill and it saved an amazing amount of time and stress for the learner. We began to integrate "asking for help" into our quests for some students. Finally, when the special education teacher had two students asking for help, the mainstream teachers naturally stepped in to help.

The result was that *all* students routinely started to ask for help from *all* teachers in the room. Labels evaporated and students quickly forgot to remember them because they just didn't change the flow of the classroom. As routine accommodations (such as a hearing aid, alternative challenges, or audiobooks) became common, they lost their mystique too. Mainstream students, who also have learning challenges, occasionally asked if they also could have a "squishy ball" to play with while they worked, or to get a copy of the audio version of the text. These were good learning tools, not just good for special education students. When top students wanted to use the tools too, we could see the stigma dissolve quickly.

"You Provide the 'Want To,' We Provide the 'How To'"

As adults we found we had to intentionally decide how to react to all the "triggers" (such as pencils) and reflect on the conditions that made these little things so explosive in the school. Our reaction to passive or refusing students could be a predictable and boring phrase, such as "You provide the want to, and I'll provide the how to," followed by enthusiasm and energy going toward students wanting to try. I've recently visited Northwest Passage High School, in Anoka, MN, that so strictly adheres to this idea of letting students sit that the staff allows students to quietly sit by themselves for days and weeks so that effort is the student's choice, not a behavior issue. I asked an administrator if that had been an issue at all, and he said with a smile, "No, they eventually figure out that they need to work to graduate. They can be seniors here into their 20s, then all they can say is, 'Man, did I waste a ton of time when I was young!' That learning is absolutely foundational to the rest of that student's life and it's worth a few lost days of work time."

Just choose not to provide attention for those choosing not to work. Play the "broken record" for students resisting work, and provide positive reinforcement to others. This seems counterintuitive to the culture of many schools. Why would any teacher allow a student to not work? Why would any educator condition his or her effort on the student's motivation? Doesn't this mean we were choosing not to care? No. The problem with these questions is that they assume that students have no voice or tools to play with in the game. They do. Teachers are not the only players in a learning relationship. We cared deeply for every student and every student was expected to behave in a way that allowed others to learn. Teachers are best when they are excited about their subject and encouraging the same in students. But students have to choose to play. Students are at their best when they try. If students try and we fail to help them learn, we need to adjust. If students do not try when we help them to learn, they need to adjust. Either adjustment takes character.

So when students refused to do work, most educators in our school let them. We learned that as adults, we could and should control the game, or at least our reactions to bad games that students were inventing. We could choose which game we wanted to play. "You provide the 'want to,' we'll provide the 'how to'" was a clear, easy-to-repeat, and predetermined response to all triggers that students could invent. It served to refocus us on learning and things that were actually worth our time and energy. It gave permission to teachers to enjoy the students who were willing to play and excuse themselves from feeling they had failed to engage every student every day, or that they were solely responsible for internal motivation—that was essentially not one of their game pieces to play.

In time, students joked about it when feeling tired: "I'm not sure I have 'want to' today"—which expresses a very human and natural challenge we all have. Also, when they did try, they could play by the same rule the teachers did and they could hold teachers accountable for the second half of the phrase: "You may not believe me, but I'm saying I want to try today. Please help me." It allowed for new relationships because the rule was fair, playable by any player, and defined which game we wanted to be playing.

Initially this was a challenge for students used to (and possibly enjoying) getting into verbal combat every day. This was a form of tough love. Ignoring negative behavior was actually our way to love that student and help him or her shape new interpersonal strategies. Really, unless students were disruptive, we left them in class and let them be bored. It was no longer the teachers' job to force

compliance; it was their job to praise and recognize effort. We trusted that seeing their peers get more engaged would eventually crack the students' stubbornness and "want to" would beat isolation and boredom. It did. Defiant or refusal incidents nearly evaporated without teachers' playing the game. Of course, some situations still popped up, but only on occasion, and far from daily and hourly.

For the teachers, this phrase also meant increased effort when we had a struggling student who was trying. When a student wanted help, we resolved to open up lunch study groups, study hall organization, after-school "how-to" sessions, and had some teachers beginning to record "how-to" tutorials on common academic sticking points. I would roam the hallways after school and increasingly saw mainstream teachers sitting with two to five students (both IEP and mainstream) working over a particular idea from class. Normally, I wouldn't associate the changes with the discourse tool, except that when I would poke my head in and ask, "What are you up to?" they would answer, "How to."

"Every Change in Habit and Action Requires Effort, Heart, and Character, and We Will Celebrate When We See It"

Initially, special education teachers sustained "prizes" as rewards for quests. The problem we soon noted was that prizes were an external reward that perhaps works well for external motivation strategies. The effect of the new game was a level of guilt expressed by the special education faculty that they were essentially using "dog training" tricks on kids who were feeling the rewards of effort and character growth.

Real character improvement, however, is substantial, realized, and powerful. Plastic trinkets seemed to be unworthy to us after life changes happened. We met after the first month and concluded that we would just give away trinkets when students thought to ask for them and without any attachment to the work the student was doing. Students could have a trinket just because we liked them. This saved my special education teachers a load of time that they used to spend keeping charts, counts, and tracking behavior-modification nonsense. In addition, this created a kind of armor or resilience from trendy programs and/or "gamification" efforts to attach "badges" to schoolwork. When you have a system built on real relationships and internal motivation, the external cure-alls look a bit pale in comparison. Instead, the staircase, completing quests to get new levels, and praise served sufficiently, so that the students wanted those reinforcements more than any prize trinket. Simply put, acts of character required that they be matched with acts of respect and recognition.

Second, teams of teachers started to catch on to this. In addition to my loud "praise" visits to classrooms, teachers amplified their own recognition of growth by telling other teachers about how a student made strides. Some teachers chose to willfully stop talking about "problem students" and spend their informal time bragging about heroic students. Only a small number of teachers engaged in this covert effort, but the effect was a schoolwide perception among students that "Everyone seems to know everything about me!" and humble reactions such as "Sheesh, all I did was bring my things to class for two weeks!" Not everyone knew, of course, but the students were getting the message—we cared and we talked to each other.

Also, celebrations moved from individual to classwide to schoolwide. After the first semester, the special education teachers approached me and wanted to have an evening parent dinner the same

week as the mainstream "Awards Night" that would highlight special education students' successes "on the top staircase." This communicated that the staircase did not end at "normal" and that recognition of good players actually got *better* the higher the level at which they were performing. The game itself was worth playing, but the icing was good too.

So we proceeded to host parents and make sure that the students who made the most progress were recognized for gains socially (sports and clubs, helping others, leadership, and overcoming adversity), academically (steps and levels, not grades), artistically, and in personal goals students had set (using a pencil, weight loss, asking for help more). Each "recognition" or achievement (we chose not to use "award") was given for documented change of habit or action.

The next semester, four families from neighboring districts transferred their special education students to our school directly as a result of hearing about our quest-based learning approach, mainstreaming, and because they had heard about this night of celebration. Our students were overcoming disabling realities and that gave them the unique opportunity to work harder, learn smarter, and fail forward with a level of character and effort that were worthy of our admiration and respect.[6] We didn't have to pretend they were achieving; they were playing the new game and winning. Parents who had reared wonderful kids could see that and they wanted their children in a school where we saw that too—or at least where we celebrated success more than punished failures.

Together, we began to value any and all efforts that represented a student's change of heart. Phoning home about success turned out to be more fun than calling home about negative behaviors. In IEP meetings we would discuss this with parents of kids who had a history of negative behavior: "Would you be OK if we handled 'failures' in-house as much as possible, and contact you only when it's an emergency? Or do you want us to call home for celebration and hiccups alike?" Many parents were relieved to go to work and have fewer calls from the principal's office—and I was relieved to get a few extra student helpers to color code the books.

CONCLUSION

We had a problem: Too many kids were taking advantage of, or not benefiting from, special education services. The result of this "game" was a culture of dropping out that started with segregation of mainstream and "spec'd" students, and that ended with too many losers. While our particular solutions may not be generalizable, they worked for us because we chose to address the game itself, not the student reactions to it. We shaped our understanding of research-based "best practices" around three core phrases:

1. no labels, just learning;
2. students provide the "want to," we provide the "how to"; and
3. every change requires effort, heart, and character.

These guiding ideas, developed and adopted by a majority (not totality) of our teachers, along with ongoing design-like thinking about the game of school, were enough to essentially transform how we hosted the game of school for our students and transformed our culture and incidentally our test results for the better.

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6. Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *Failing forward: Turning mistakes into stepping stones for success.* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Entire libraries have been filled with potential "answers" to the challenge of improving schools, but I wonder if they all appreciate that schools are a game too. Are schools essentially what we choose to make them into? Are we intentional about our "game" design and "user" reactions? What game have we made in America's public schools? Are the current systems in place producing "players" who are embracing learning, developing lifetime skills, or at the very least graduating with work-ready talent? Do we have students who are playing with us or against us? Teachers? Administrators? Parents?

We decide the game rules that we present to students whether we are aware of this or not. I propose that school is a game. There are engaging games and boring ones, complex games and simplistic ones, rigorous games and nearly passive ones. Which are schools? Games can be relevant and complex, or they can be simplistic, inconsistent, or even frustrating. How many players are metaphorically "throwing controllers at their televisions" when they try to play the game of school? How many are gaining relevant and complex skill sets in schools that easily transfer to life contexts? How many are having fun?

In conclusion, this is still just a story. I'm not writing as a researcher, just as a former administrator who can testify that there are answers to the challenges of schools. The recollection does show what can happen when members of a staff think like game designers and actively refine their programs based on "player" reactions to their game. So what I witnessed was a kind of proof of concept work. It can work. The game can be different. If we could get these results without a precedent, I'm excited to see what you can do *with* one.

I am convinced that many of the challenges schools face are solvable if the adults involved are willing to work together, agree on core values, invest the "want to," and research the "how to." Transforming a school is not as much about particular discipline policies or initiatives as it is about a change of effort, heart, and character.

As we did in this case, changing the game may require reading education law for ourselves, identifying sticky problems, changing language, changing policies, and keeping an eagle eye out for natural solutions that need to be part of revolving refinement. We need to be designers, not disciplinarians; gamers, not implementers; and recognize that effort from students is simply worth more than compliance, even if it takes some time to plan for. Frankly, a better game is just more fun to play.

As we move forward, we can share our successes, tell our stories, and direct our own dialogue to inspire, challenge, and direct an educator conversation that will define us. If you, or a school you know, are ready for a new game, let's talk soon.