BEYOND MEASURE

DISCUSSION & ACTION GUIDE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Our 2009 documentary, *Race to Nowhere*, changed the conversation about education in America. The film revealed that for too long our devotion to unlimited homework,testing, and competitive college admissions has been sickening kids and exhausting families. Swept up in the achievement arms race, students and parents find themselves battling to keep up with expectations that place busyness, rankings, and résumé-building before health and genuine learning. Even families who don't overemphasize grades, scores, and college admissions find the quicksand hard to escape. The result is a generation of unhealthy kids who are unprepared to thrive in school and beyond.

Race to Nowhere shines a spotlight on this epidemic and since its release has ignited a national movement to shift the way we think about learning. Still, many people who were inspired to advocate for change after watching Race to Nowhere asked us an important question: "Where do we start?"

Beyond Measure, the book, is an answer. Providing a bridge between 2009's Race to Nowhere and the 2015 film, *Beyond Measure*, that shares its title, the book offers a way forward—an eye-opening, inspiring guide to how we can revolutionize learning, reclaim our children's well-being, and re-envision success for a lifetime.

Through the stories of courageous parents, students, and educators who are leading the way, *Beyond Measure* shows the steps each of us can take to free kids and families from the grip of high-stakes childhood. And with in-depth research on the science of learning and shocking data on the state of our children's health, our book demonstrates beyond a doubt how urgently our kids need change.

From small nightly actions in our own living rooms to sweeping, school-wide transformations, the ideas in this book call on us all to work together to restore our children's health and happiness. *Beyond Measure* urges us to reinvent what it means to be successful.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This book is more than a compendium of compelling research and inspiring real-life stories of change. It is a spark to provoke much-needed discussion, an opportunity to question the status quo, a springboard to create change. *Beyond Measure* is designed as a launching pad—its stories and ideas a platform for igniting concerted, collaborative, long-lasting efforts to make your school community better. It's not where we've been, but where we go from here that counts.

DISCUSSION TO ACTION

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS

Most book clubs meet only once to discuss any given book, and then they move on. This book is different. Not merely a personal reading experience, *Beyond Measure* is a tool to bring school communities together and to scaffold their efforts for change. As such, it will be most effective if reading groups hold a series of discussions that take place over time—an approach that gives your community's needs and ideas a chance to evolve from discussion to action.

We have organized the book discussions outlined here into four separate sessions, which can be held weekly, monthly, or quarterly, depending on your group's needs. You may also compress or expand the number of sessions to suit your community. When you host discussions, try using these **best practices for organizing a productive community meeting** to ensure that the outcome is useful and all voices are heard:

- Invite people with diverse perspectives, including parents, students, teachers, principals, and school board members. Consider including coaches, tutors, pediatricians, counselors, and local faith leaders, too. Community change occurs when a cross-section of stakeholders are included and heard, and you can begin that process.

- Arrange seats in a circle to set a collaborative tone and ensure that everyone can be seen and heard.

- Consider opening with a brief personal story about why this subject matters to you and why you felt moved or motivated to organize an ongoing conversation around the book.

- Moving around the room, begin with brief introductions and a question that allows all participants to share a bit about themselves before the discussion begins. Asking everyone to "please say your name and, in one sentence, share your favorite memory from your own schooling," for example, gives every participant the chance to have the group's attention and sets the stage for warm, respectful dialogue.
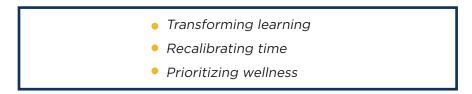
- Hand out pens and index cards, on which you will later encourage participants to write their key ideas and intentions.

- Introduce the discussion by outlining the four-session process and describing what you hope the group will achieve. (For example: "help our kids get healthy again" or "shift the focus from testing to learning." Avoid naming specific actions at this stage, such as curtailing homework, as those will be determined through group discussion.)

- Use the questions in this guide to ignite an open conversation about the issues raised in the book. Stay focused, but also allow the conversation to delve into issues that are particular to your community and may not be mentioned here. You don't have to ask every single question; let the flow of the conversation determine how much you cover. In some cases, a single question might provoke enough conversation to last your full meeting.

- Giving yourself at least 30 minutes before you adjourn, shift into action mode. Ask participants to reflect on the conversation you've just had and to write down their main priorities for change in your community. Then read aloud the submissions and note as a group which priorities rise to the top.

- As facilitator, suggest action steps that could begin the process of change around your group's shared priorities and ask for input on those proposed action steps. Then ask participants to write down how they can personally contribute or commit to those actions. Putting these in writing makes them clear and tangible—and thus more actionable.

- Follow up with participants promptly, within a few days, underscoring the key priorities your group identified, the action plan you discussed, and the personal commitments participants made to contribute to that plan. Be sure to circulate the details of your next meeting as well.

PATHWAYS TO CHANGE

One important final point before getting started: Launching cultural change can feel like an overwhelming task, but it needn't be. As you and your co-readers hone your course of action, it may help to organize your efforts into three categories. These are the **three critical pathways to changing school culture**:

> - *Transforming learning*
> - *Recalibrating time*
> - *Prioritizing wellness*

Examine these three pathways together and determine your community's highest priority. Then start your actions small, using the steps in this guide and in the book's Chapter Eight for ideas.

SESSION 1: NEEDS AND PRIORITIES

Chapters
- Introduction/Prologue
- 1: Health
- 2: Time

Discussion
- How have you been affected by the achievement race? What parallels to your own life did you notice while reading?
- In what ways does the achievement culture exert pressure on you, your children, or your students?
- Where do you draw the line when achievement conflicts with health? How much health, mental and physical, is worth sacrificing to attain credentials?
- If you were to conduct a "total time redesign," as the book suggests, which needs would you reserve time for above all else? How closely does your current life match those priorities—or not?
- What is your definition of success? Where did it come from? What shaped it?
- What does "success" mean at our school? Is there one definition or picture of success, or many? What does that say about our shared values?
- How do you describe a child who is thriving, and what ideas do you have to help our children thrive?
- What are the obstacles to change in our community?
- What could you do now—in the next three to six weeks—to take a step toward change?

Action
- Give each participant three index cards and ask them to write down the three top priorities for change in your school community, one on each card. Then post the cards on a wall, clustering cards with the same priorities together, so that you can see where your community's most urgent needs lie. This short list will guide your action.

- Initiate a survey of students to gauge their state of health and identify their key sources of stress. If it's not feasible to survey all the students in the school, survey as many as you can, taking care to reach a diverse group. It may or may not be possible to gather and tally results before your next book discussion; that's okay. As soon as the results are in, they will inform your work for change.

- Create an expanded invitation list for your next meeting. Ensure that it includes all kinds of stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, coaches, administrators, school counselors, school board members, and other community members who work with and care about children. Reach out to potential participants you rarely hear from. Even if they can't all come, an invitation can be the beginning of dialogue. Strong and lasting change comes when people from all corners of a community are engaged.

SESSION 2: PROBLEM SOLVING

Chapters
- 3: Homework
- 4: Testing
- 5: College

Discussion
- Name one aspect of modern schooling that you questioned while reading the book that you hadn't questioned before.

- What is the root of the pressures that students, educators, and families these days are feeling? What drives people's fear of falling behind?

- Imagine that homework is optional. What do you believe are the most valuable ways for children and families to use their after-school, evening, and weekend time?

- Which valuable skills and qualities cannot be measured on written tests? See how many you can name. How are we showing children that these attributes also matter?

- What signs besides written tests show you that a child is learning and growing? What other measures could you use to gauge students' progress?

- Having learned about colleges' recruitment tactics and the "admissions-industrial complex," whom do you believe the college admissions process mainly serves?

- What are the challenges faced by a student who wants to opt out of the college admissions arms race? What support do they need?

- What would you say to a skeptic who argues that children have to keep running the achievement race or they'll be left behind?

- What did you learn from the example communities in the book? Which actions did you find most inspiring?

- What would it take to bring the changes featured in the book to life in your school?

Action

- Report to each other on what small changes you've each begun to make since the first meeting. Share ideas. What's working? What's challenging?
- Review the results of your student survey, if they're available by now.
- Revise your list of priorities according to the new information you've gathered from students and other stakeholders.
- Ask each participant to pledge to change one thing in their home or classroom—something individual that can be achieved before the next meeting. Each person should both write down their pledge and say it out loud. One person's action will inspire another's.

SESSION 3: A BETTER VISION

Chapters

- 6: Learning
- 7: Wellness
- 8: Action

Discussion

- What is your most memorable learning experience, whether in or out of school? Think about the circumstances of that learning experience. What made it so effective? How does it compare to your children's and students' experiences in school today?
- What do you think the purpose of school is?
- What do you feel are the important qualities that predict success in college and adult life? What prepared you? And how can we better prepare young people with the skills they need?
- How do we move from schooling to learning?
- Describe a wish you have for your school. Imagine for a moment that time, money, and resources are all available. Think big!
- What would a school that prioritizes the health and learning needs of every student look like?
- How strong and personal are the connections at your school: student-to-teacher, student-to-student, and teacher-to-teacher? How could they be made stronger?
- What is working at your school? What supports students' well-being and emotional life? What encourages deep learning? What enhances collaboration and creativity?
- What is a current educational practice that you would like to see eliminated in order to prioritize well-being? And one to prioritize learning?
- What would an ideal day of school look like? What changes could you make, as a parent or educator, to help your community come closer to that ideal?
- What do the book's examples teach us about the way to achieve change?

Action

- Report to each other on the personal pledges you made at the end of the last meeting. Share ideas. What's working? What's challenging?

- Create a health task force of four to six community members who are ready to set bigger change in motion. Refer back to the three Pathways to Change above for direction. Base your actions on the priorities your group established in Sessions 1 and 2, and on the results of your student survey. You might decide to tackle excessive homework, testing, substance abuse, sleeplessness, or another concern first. Whatever your unique goals, health is a purpose that the whole community can get behind. Your health task force can spearhead the work on the priorities you've identified, setting a schedule for continued meetings and outlining a concrete timeline for action. Some suggested strategies:

    - Reach out to leaders—including students—who share your values and can support your mobilization for change. Principals or assistant principals, school board members, or school counselors may be among them.

    - Maintain an email list of everyone in your community with an interest in improving student well being, even those who can't come to meetings, and keep them updated on your progress. They may support you at key moments. Also consider creating a Facebook group for shared discussions and announcements.

    - Engage the press by reaching out to local education reporters, newspaper columnists, and bloggers, and by writing letters to the editor. Engage the public by tabling at school events to distribute information, gather e-mail addresses, and spark discussion.

    - Set some near-term goals that can be accomplished within six months. Small, immediate wins set the stage for longer-term change.
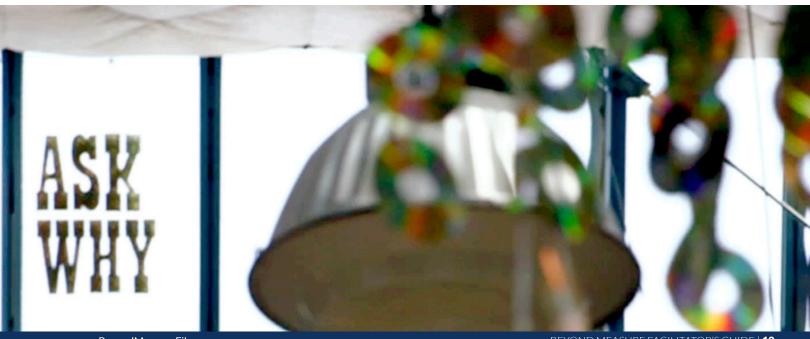
SESSION 4: LAUNCHPAD - A WAY FORWARD

Chapters
- 9: Epilogue

Discussion
- What do you think is the biggest obstacle to educational change in your community?
- What kinds of challenges do you expect to encounter as you continue this work for change? How can you prepare for them?
- If you could create a school-within-a-school in your community to try out innovative practices, as Oak Knoll Elementary School and Monument Mountain Regional High School did, which changes would you try first?
- What policies, practices, or attitudes would have to be in place in order for those improvements to be meaningful and long lasting?
- What support do you need to be part of the process toward change?

Action

- Look for a critical friend—a principal, superintendent, teacher, or parent or student organizer from an other community that's undertaking change. Ask that person to come speak at a community meeting to raise awareness of what's possible and built a network of support. If that person is willing, you can continue to share ideas, feedback, and mutual support as your work goes on.

- Establish a means for your own group members to stay in touch with each other and to continue supporting each other as your sustained work for change goes on.

- Urge a school administrator and/or a local librarian to make this book a school-wide or community-wide read.

FURTHER RESOURCES

ORGANIZATIONS:

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, at fairtest.org

The Buck Institute for Education, at bie.org

Edutopia, a publication of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, at edutopia.org

The Education Conservancy, at educationconservancy.org

Colleges That Change Lives, at ctcl.org

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, at casel.org

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