**This essay was published in...**

FOREWORD BY **DOUG LEMOV**
**PAUL BAMBRICK-SANTOYO**

DVD INCLUDED

# LEVERAGE LEADERSHIP 2.0

A Practical Guide to **Building Exceptional Schools**

Uncommon Schools | Change History.
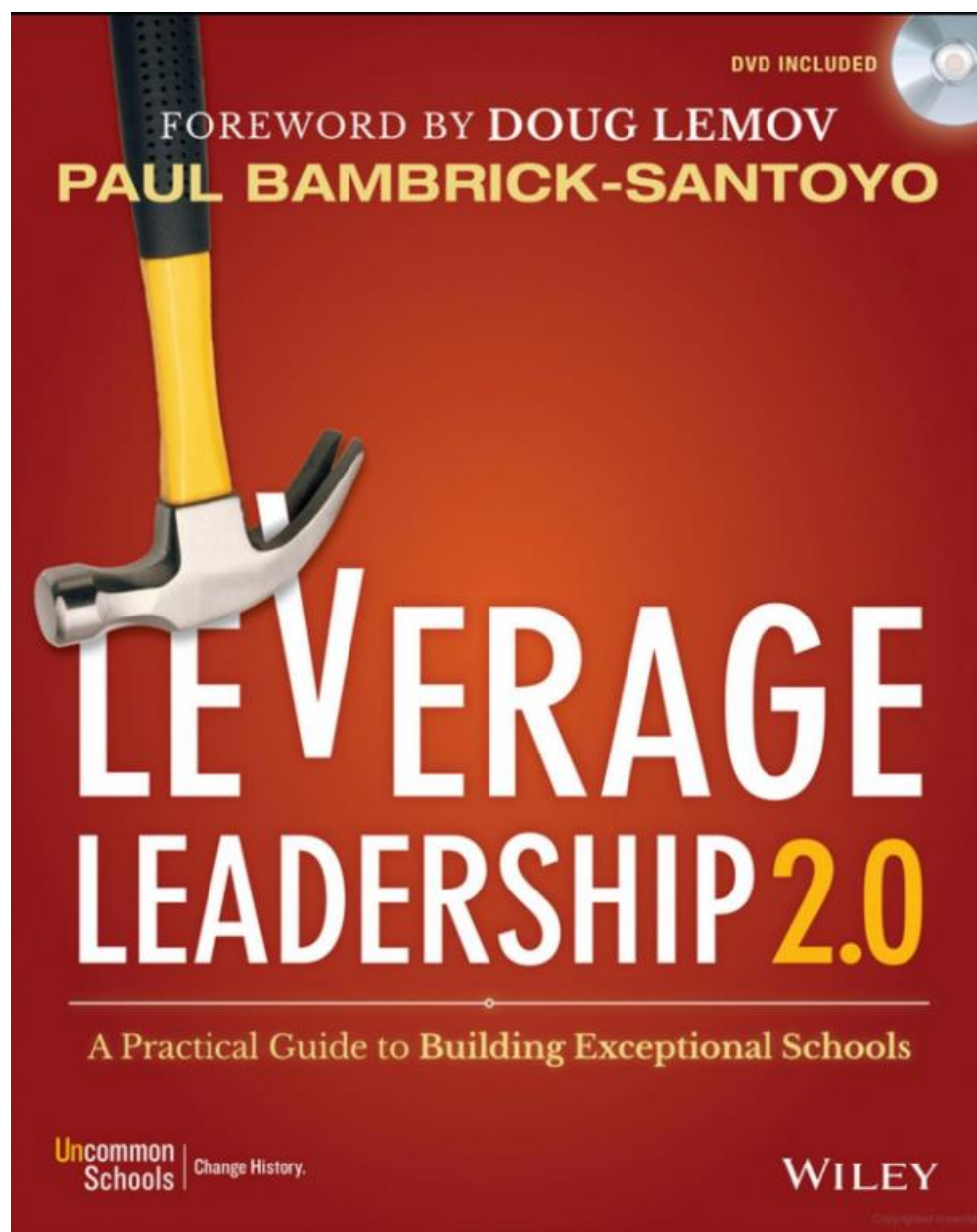
WILEY

## Findings from the Field

Stephen Chiger

I came to data-driven instruction as an unashamed skeptic. "This sounds like another round of teaching to the test," I sniffed, as I begrudgingly shuffled in to a professional development workshop that would wind up changing the course of my professional life.

I'd been teaching in an urban high school for four years, and my idealism, while not extinguished, had begun to seriously sag under the weight of some questions that most teachers in underresourced communities face. How could I teach well when my students came to me at so many disparate levels? If my students' primary school education had been inadequate, was it too late to change anything by the time they

were in high school? And even if I could run my class effectively, were the systemic expectations so low—and the drag of poverty so high—that my efforts comprised little more than blowing against the wind?

Suffice it to say, something happened during the course of that PD that altered how I saw education. I read the case studies of schools who had turned around student achievement. I analyzed student data and saw the kinds of insights it provided about learning. I thought of my students—of Zakiyyah, of Dawanna, of Porsalin and Paul and Gwen. Didn't I owe it to them to push myself and my school?

After hearing a segment on using assessments to improve literacy, I called the facilitator over.

"This sounds great," I said. "But this isn't how my department teaches English. We teach poems, we teach stories, we teach the five-paragraph essay."

"Well," the facilitator said, "it's not about which poem or story you teach; it's about how you teach it, assess it, and reteach it. That's what you need to rethink."

I still remember what I was thinking in that moment. First, I thought that this was an incredibly intimidating and outrageous thing to say. Second, I thought that it was exactly right. If we designed tests to measure student literacy, and if we set the rigor of those tests to match what we knew would be true college preparation, we could keep our curriculum focused on the material that really mattered—not just the idiosyncratic whims of the moment. We could, with the backbone of a data-driven program in place, transplant a refreshed academic vision, one to which all of us would be aligned.

A data-driven program wouldn't be teaching to the test; we'd be teaching to the *kids*. More specially, we'd be teaching to their needs because we'd know—precisely—what they were.

Now an instructional leader myself, I try to pay forward the wisdom I learned that day and from many inspiring leaders since. I prepare for data meetings with attentiveness and zeal. I analyze my teachers' data with the same alacrity I want them to apply. And I try to meet people wherever they are—whether new or experienced, struggling or masterful—so that together we can find the right answers for our students, by analyzing one question at a time.