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Hess, F. (2015). *The cage-busting teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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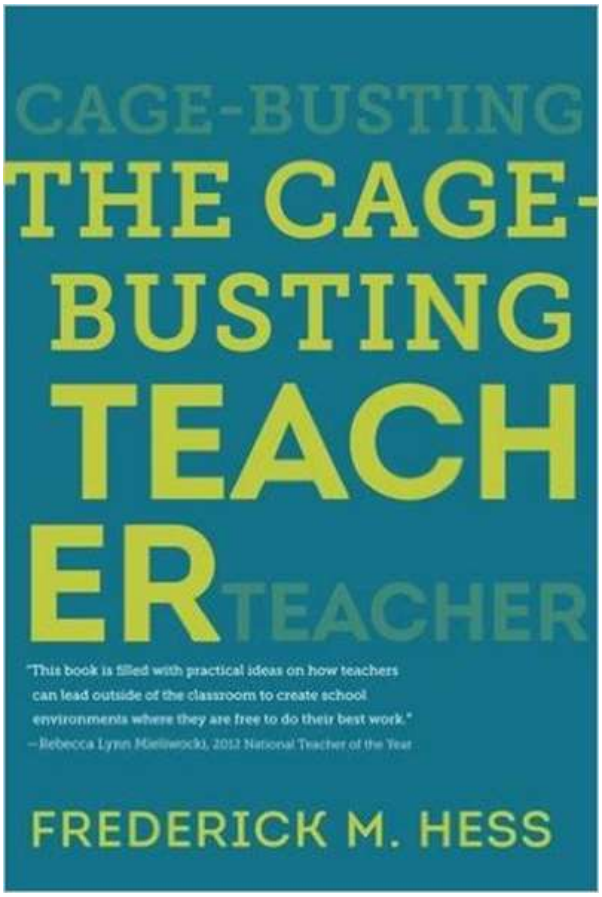
Author Rick Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, continues his efforts to make practical suggestions around education policy in his latest work, *The cage-busting teacher*. A follow-up to his 2013 book *Cage-busting leadership*, this volume is a worthy sequel, well-targeted at its audience of current classroom teachers. *The cage-busting teacher* provides practical advice for teachers wishing to find the space to make creative improvements from within their profession. It is a book meant to speak to teachers as professionals, and to give them practical advice regarding how they might use their authority and agency to change their own profession for the better.



In his typical style, Hess discusses both big-picture ideas as well as specific policy prescriptions, and in a positive tone. But Hess also speaks bluntly about obstacles teachers face when trying to control their school conditions. Early in the book, Hess explores the lack of true respect for teachers as professionals as an impediment toward improvements, and criticizes the "cheap talk and lip service" that

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is often directed toward teachers. After describing what he felt was some over-the-top (and therefore empty) praise for teachers by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and actor Matt Damon, Hess delivers some classic lines about teacher respect:

> This isn't how we talk to professionals…You don't lard buckets of mushy sentiment on people you really respect. This is how we talk to Cub Scouts or t-ball players. This is the sweet, syrupy tone we reserve for little kids because they're cute and too fragile for tougher stuff. The truth is that such talk infantilizes teachers and crowds out respect. Real respect is earned. It's not given away freely or casually. It's a conversation between equals, and we usually don't feel obligated to shower banal praise on our equals (p. 30).

Hess's work in *The cage-busting teacher* can be divided into two major projects: 1) Defining the cage, and 2) Describing ways of "busting" it. The book explores various "bars" of the cage and provides numerous examples of challenges teachers have faced in trying to break free. As Hess works through these projects, an important theme that runs throughout the book in discussing both the cage itself and they ways to break it is the fallacious idea that teachers must choose a side between "reformers" and "the unions." Hess argues that this is a false choice for teachers, and that cage-busters should not be happy with either side at the moment, but should look for actual solutions they can use. In Hess's words, the cage-busting teacher "…knows that some teachers work harder and are better at their jobs than others and that professionals should be accountable. But he also knows that many proposals for strengthening accountability are half-baked and that there's reason to fear overreliance on test scores or unreliable metrics" (p. 29). This practical approach is one Hess consistently follows throughout the book's chapters.

Hess defines the "cage" as "the routines, rules, and habits that exhaust teachers' time, passion, and energy" (p. 3). Hess argues that teachers often have their time casually wasted on paperwork and other burdens, face increasing numbers of sometimes contradictory directives and accountability measures, and therefore often tend to simply close their doors and block everything out, rather look for ways to make the situations better for themselves and for their students. They "accept dysfunction as routine," and so simply "grumble quietly about it" (p. 11) as they close their classroom doors and wait for the current policy or administrative fad to pass. In other words, they content themselves with being stuck in "the cage."

Some "bars" of the cage really do exist; what should teachers do about those? One bar of the cage Hess describes is policy, which he divides into "big P versus little p policy." Big P policies are items like statutes which are hard to change, whereas little p policies are "local policies, practices, or district conventions that can be more readily altered" (p. 100). Hess describes both with a frank explanation that policies are "crude tools" that are most often written for the "lowest common denominator" – the teachers most likely to make mistakes (pp. 91-92), and argues that teachers can often make many of the changes they'd like to, if they are able to distinguish between little p and big P policies, and approach them accordingly. On accountability, Hess argues that there are three kinds: "Input regulation," which "dictates how services should be provided;" "outcome accountability," which "doesn't regulate how the work is done as long as providers deliver the requisite results;" and "consumer choice," which "leaves decisions about quality to individual families" (pp. 98-99). Schools face all three kinds of accountability under various circumstances, but this is a useful way for teachers to think

about how policies are written, and what kinds of solutions teachers might propose for each.

Another "bar" will have varying levels of applicability around the country: teachers' unions. On unions, Hess argues that, "…teacher unions are a powerful force that can reinforce the cage – or be used to bust it. Cage-busters leave the grand pronouncements to others and focus on the concrete changes that help create the schools and unions they desire" p. 140). The content of this topic is similar to arguments Hess makes extensively in *Cage-busting leadership*: fights with unions often arise because one side or the other (or both) haven't actually read the contracts or rules, and are arguing past each other. Hess does note that sometimes following good-faith negotiations on both sides, people will arrive at an impasse and it may be necessary to strike out on one's own and create organizations outside of the unions, but the real point is to look for allies, not enemies. "Cage-busters," he argues, "make it a point t judge everyone, 'reformer' and union leader alike, on what they're doing…not *what they're saying* but on what they're doing" (p. 164). For Hess, unions might be a bar – but they might just as easily be an imaginary one, or even an aid to busting other bars.

The bulk of the book is devoted to Hess's other project: many methods of "cage-busting." Hess defines "cage-busting" as a practical approach to improving schools. He writes that cage-busting "is not about garnering headlines or picking fights; it's about creating great communities of teaching and learning, one step at a time" (p. 14). Rather than complaining, or getting into philosophical or political fights, cage-busters should define problems with as much precision and accuracy as possible, and then take concrete steps to make improvements toward their goals.

Hess argues that most teachers' solution when faced with difficulties in their jobs – simply working harder – will not work very often or for very many people: "…when success requires incredible individuals working incredible hours against incredible odds, success is going to be the exception" (p. 36). He begins to suggest some practical ways teachers can improve their situations: by defining problems more clearly, by simply taking action (rather than holding on to good intentions but doing nothing), being willing to both celebrate the success of other excellent teachers but also to criticize those whose poor performance or behaviors deserve it, and trying to see and treat principals as partners in school improvement, rather than as constant adversaries. *The cage-busting teacher* provides numerous examples of difficulties teachers have faced and problems they have taken on, with varying levels of cage-busting success.

School leaders are important partners for teachers, though teachers often see them as the ones imposing the cage on them. Sometimes this is true, though sometimes it is inadvertent (see Hess's comment about making policies for the "lowest-common denominator"), and Hess advises teachers to give principals concrete solutions they can say yes to, rather than simply griping or making impossible demands; making sure they can execute on the plan if the principal or district actually does say yes, and looking for ways to share credit and make their leaders look good. But in what may be the most simple but also most important bit of advice in the entire book, Hess suggests that teachers who feel trapped in the cage by school, system, or state rules should simply…read the rules. Often teachers are told their ideas are prevented by a rule, but are actually only prevented by an urban legend. Hess quotes Lori Nazareno, a teacher at Denver's Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy, who told him:

> If I want to pursue an idea and someone tells me I can't, I ask, 'can you show me in contract, policy, or statute where it says that I can't?' I've found that people think policy or the

> contract says certain things and it doesn't. It was just the way it was done at a school where they worked. (p. 62)

Hess suggests that simply reading the rules will go a long way with school leaders, with unions, and with other policymakers as teachers push for improvements. Again, fights are not always (in fact usually not) necessary, and certain bars of the cage may not actually exist: "Cage-busters know what the facts are and what the rules actually say – not what people *think* they say" (p. 77). Hess made a similar argument to school leaders in *Cage-busting leadership*, and it is no less true for teachers.

As teachers become successful in cage-busting, they are often asked (or told) to take on more leadership roles, and Hess speaks to some pitfalls of "teacher leadership." For example: teachers who work hard to start a successful program may be pushed into expanding it too quickly, or pushed into other, unrelated tasks that require a "teacher leader"; forced collaboration with people who may never agree with a school's or project's mission (schools should intentionally recruit for mission); and flawed data use (teachers see "data" and use "data" all the time, but often need much more training and support to be sure they are making wise decisions based on the data they have in front of them – and to know when to ask for or generate other data). Along with the excellent advice that every single good idea doesn't necessarily have to "scale," Hess provides advice for making painful meetings less painful and more productive, by implementing suggestions he has made elsewhere in *The cage-busting teacher*: be precise in one's purpose, use appropriate data, and focus on solutions, not problems.

Working out the best "fit" between teachers and schools – a common issue in higher education but one that has not been a prominent topic in K12 hiring – is another topic Hess addresses as a piece of cage-busting." Hess shares stories from a range of organizations meant to either match teachers with better environments, as the organization Enriched does, matching substitute teachers with schools, for example. He also suggests ways the job of "teacher" could look different, and spends time discussing as an example a project of *Teacher quality 2.0* contributor Bryan Hassel's organization Public Impact, which describes what a teacher's job might look like if it were "unbundled" and broken into various specialized tasks (which could be done by various specialized employees, making different compensation).

A word on the book's appendices. Hess includes short chapter summaries, helpful for teachers pushed for time. However, in the fast-moving space that includes educational nonprofits and startup projects, an appendix listing "Teacher Voice Organizations" cannot help but be quickly out-of-date. And in fact some of the organizational priorities listed in this appendix have already changed, though the book was published just this year.

For regular Hess readers, much in *The cage-busting teacher* will sound familiar. At times the book feels as though it is lining together anecdotes from teachers around the country, but that is also a strength – Hess provides real-world examples of ways in which teachers have been able to operate creatively as teachers, rather than leaving their classrooms for administrative or central office jobs, or giving up on the system entirely. The book is well-geared toward an audience of practicing classroom teachers looking for ways to be creative and successful while remaining classroom teachers. Some of the best advice one can give is often the simplest – in this case, Hess's encouragement that everyone "read the rules" before assuming bad motives of opponents and starting fights. The most frustrated teachers and policymakers would do well to consider Hess's constant admonishment, uncomfortable as it may be, that teachers and

school leaders, or education reformers and union heads, charitably assume the best motives of their opponents and work through problems in a practical, methodical way together. Those efforts may end in an impasse sometimes, but the effort will solve more problems than many might believe – sometimes the cage needs to be busted, but sometimes it doesn't really exist.

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About the Reviewer

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