



'Every Child CAN is a guidebook for how to create an outstanding school—indeed, an outstanding educational organization—and how to maintain that excellence over a significant period of time.'

Howard Gardner

EVERY CHILD CAN

**Riverside School's Design-Led Approach
to Empower Children**

Kiran Bir Sethi

with Mohanram Gudipati and Apoorva Bhandari

**EVERY
CHILD
CAN**

Advance Praise for the Book

'I can't think of anyone better-suited to write a book on design thinking in education than Kiran. I have seen her start with a few students in Riverside to the global movement "Design for Change" that affects the life of over two million children and works with schools across the world. One thing has not changed with Kiran over these two decades and more—her keeping the child at the centre and staying sharply focus on evidence of what actually works! Every reader can learn from Kiran and Riverside's unique and illuminating journey.'

— **SRIDHAR RAJAGOPALAN,**
Co-founder and Chief Learning Officer, Education Initiatives

'The first time I entered Riverside, I met a Grade 1 student who was my guide and took me around the school. In those few minutes, I understood the power of Kiran's vision. This six-year-old was filled with joy and energy; she could articulate insights about what she was learning and how she was learning. I knew that I had discovered a one-of-its-kind, extraordinary place. Over the past two decades, Riverside has profoundly shaped the way I think about education, and we've carried those lessons into Teach For India's many classrooms. I've learned the power of truly safe spaces, student agency and partnership. I've come to believe that you don't go to school just to get a job and live a life of your choice. You go to school to change the world.'

— **SHAHEEN MISTRI,**
CEO, Teach For India

'The Riverside School's pioneering pedagogical model is an inspiration to schools not only in India but across the globe, and I've been proud to see Riverside included among our World's Best School Prizes finalists. With heart and passion, Kiran Bir Sethi eloquently and expertly shows us exactly how the school did it and what others can learn from their expertise.'

— **VIKAS POTA,**
Founder and CEO, T4 Education

"This book should be devoured and digested by everyone who has contact with young people. Kiran Sethi is a phenomenon and a hugely positive force for good in the world. While others give lip service to "child-centered," she is the only one I know who is truly doing it at scale—in sixty five countries! Her annual entirely kid-run "I Can" conferences are marvels, and testaments to what all young people—and particularly younger ones—are capable of, both with and without modern technology. Her perspective on young people—and her methods for helping them grow up—should be known and replicated everywhere. Read and be inspired!"

**— MARC PRENSKY,
Author, EMPOWERED!: Re-framing 'Growing Up' for a New Age**

'Kiran's design-led approach to education is exactly how education should be. When there is creative purpose to what students learn and they become designers in their work, they transform from passive recipients to empowered leaders. What Kiran and her wonderful team at Riverside School have done provides a blueprint for us all at a time when education needs it most.'

**— RICHARD DUNNE,
Founder and Director of The Harmony Project**



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Kiran Bir Sethi, Apoorva Bhandari and Mohan Gudipati assert the moral right to be identified as the authors of this work.

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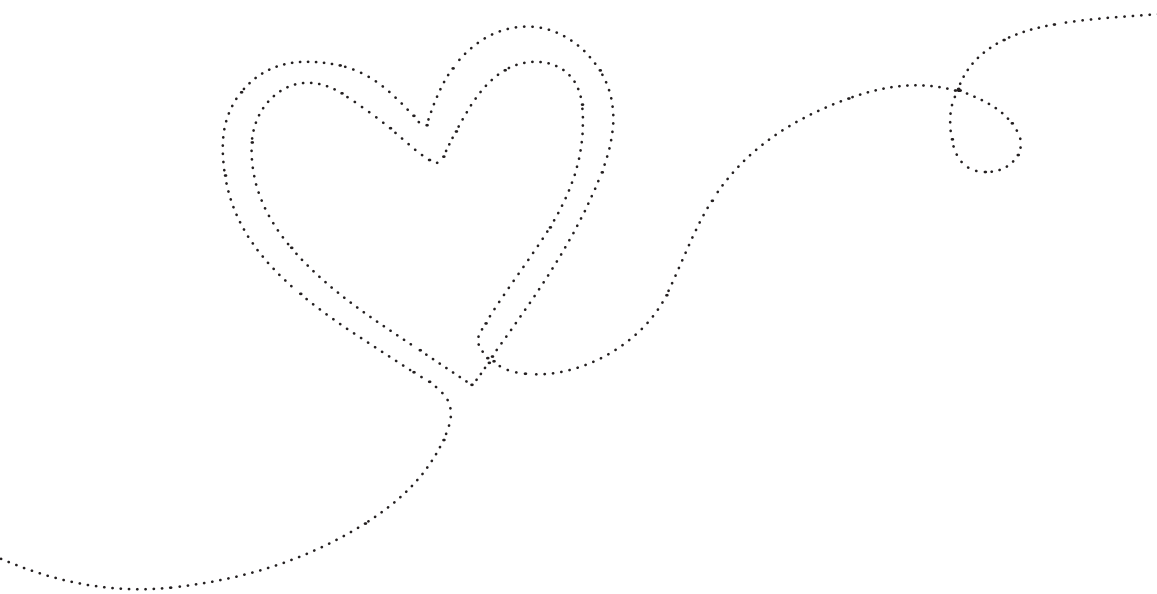
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Kiran Bir Sethi

with Mohanram Gudipati and Apoorva Bhandari







For

Raag and Jazz

Being your mama unleashed my superpower

Papa and Mama

For naming me Kiran and lighting the fire

Family – Born into, Blessed with

*For being my anchor in the good times,
and my lighthouse during the tough times*

**Every single Student, Parent, Friend,
Well-wisher, Critic**

It is your story in every page of this history

Mohan and Apoorva

For not giving up and not giving in

The Riverside Dream Team

*Together, we CAN. Together, we DID!
What a ride this has been.*

Bonita Vaz-Shimray and the HarperCollins team

Thank you for the opportunity to tell my story

With

Gratitude. Respect. Love.



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*'May 1000 Riverside-inspired educational enterprises
be created, reformed, and maintained.*

*Our increasingly interconnected and fragile world
will be grateful-our children and grandchildren will
be the beneficiaries.'*

Fore **WORD**

Howard Gardner

Kiran Sethi, the founder and long-time head of the Riverside School in Ahmedabad, India, has written a remarkable book—indeed, it's really three books. It is at once a *chronicle* of a remarkable school, with its remarkable founder; an *account* of how Kiran and her colleagues first designed and then constantly strove to improve the school; and, most precious and most rare, a *handbook* of how a determined team of designers can work cooperatively and productively in many spheres.

I've had the privilege of knowing Kiran Sethi for over two decades. I've watched with admiration as Riverside moved from a *vision* to a *reality* to a *model* for the wider world of K-12 education. Until 2012, I had never visited India, and along with family members who are also educators, we were determined to see as much of the country as possible—visiting seven cities and far more schools in less than a month.

Without question, a visit to the Riverside School and a reunion with Kiran, was a planned highlight of our crowded itinerary. Alas, when we arrived in Ahmedabad, Kiran was ill, and we were very concerned. Clearly, we would have to experience Riverside without her guidance and interpretations.

That said, in one way, our visit to the school proved more genuine. Without Kiran at our side, without any signals that she might have given deliberately or unconsciously, we could see and judge for ourselves the school in action. In a word: Our family of educators was deeply impressed with what we saw, heard and experienced from teachers, administrators, students and their families. The Riverside

II Every Child CAN

School is remarkable for the knowledge and dedication of the whole school's family—manifested dramatically (and poignantly) when its founder, guiding spirit and luminous director is regrettably absent from the scene.

The great sociologist Max Weber had a concept that elucidates this phenomenon. Writing over a century ago, he underscored the importance of *charisma*—that precious human quality that inspires others, in many cases, happily, in a positive direction—but also, it must be said, charismatic leadership can move people to be destructive as well. (Think Abraham Lincoln, then think Adolf Hitler.)

What Kiran Sethi has achieved would not have been possible without generous dollops of charisma—as anyone who meets her, hears her or watches her TED talks can verify! Indeed, who but a charismatic visionary would even have thought of—let alone have succeeded in pulling off—a voyage of 2,500 young people to Rome, Italy, for a conference with the inspired title: VatiCAN.

And yet, the unique value of this book is that it describes, it spells out in vivid detail, what Weber termed the 'routinization of charisma'. As I understand, it is the process whereby charismatic leadership and creativity can be described, foregrounded, shared and distributed so that it can be implemented in organizations and personnel anywhere, indeed everywhere. *Of course, charisma can be routinized in a variety of ways—this book exemplifies positive routinization of key ideas and practices.*

To put it sharply: *Every Child CAN* is a guidebook for how to create an outstanding school—indeed, an outstanding educational organization—and how to maintain that

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excellence over a significant period of time.

As a long-time student and scholar of education, I have never started a school, nor have I even wanted to. But having been in schools for over 70 years, and having

studied them for over 40 years, I have certainly witnessed the full range—from excellence to mediocrity, from charismatic leadership to catastrophic non-leadership.

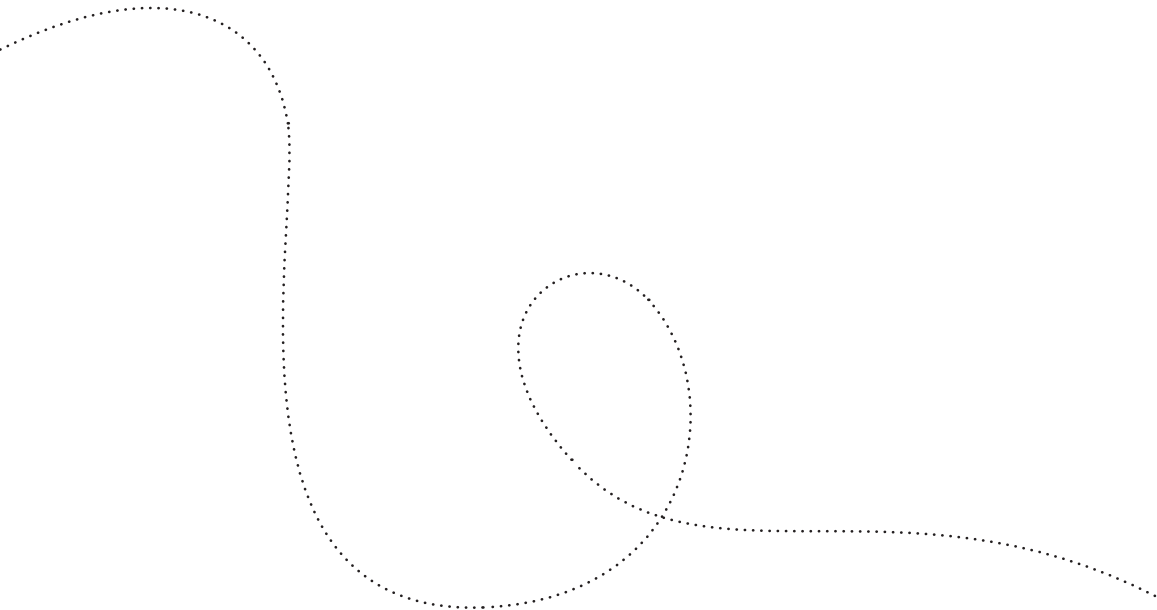
I've seen or known about individuals with remarkable ideas, but ones who showed neither the inclination or capacity to found and run such schools—Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey are well known examples from history. I've personally known individuals who launched remarkable schools as well as other educational institutions (like museums or theme parks) but whose charisma has never been routinized, and regrettably, their creations can now be encountered only in books, films and video.

Happily, I've heard of, and even known a few, that have succeeded in extending the charisma—this has been true of Maria Montessori, the physician-turned-educator; and of Loris Malaguzzi, the journalist-turned-educator who fashioned the early childhood centres in northern Italy, networks of schools justifiably admired by Kiran Sethi.

Now, at last, thanks to Kiran Sethi, we have an invaluable guide to the creation and sustaining of an excellent K-12 school; and, as well, we have a set of concepts and examples that will allow motivated educator-designers to launch,


modify and present to the world the realizations of their own ideas. May 1000 Riverside-inspired educational enterprises be created, reformed, and maintained. Our increasingly interconnected and fragile world will be grateful—our children and grandchildren will be the beneficiaries.

Howard Gardner
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2023



Howard Gardner is the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Research Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.



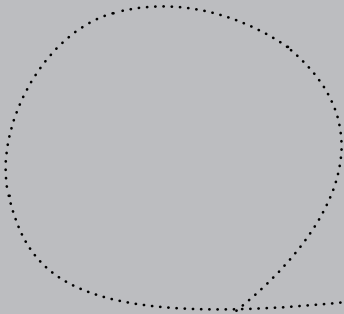


My
ICAN
Story



Riverside, when I started it, was an act of faith – there had to be a better way to educate our children: that learning must be more than marks and degrees. Schools must be a place where children grow, thrive and graduate as empowered humane citizens.

Not by chance—but by design.



Preface

My I CAN Story

The dreaded 'red' pen!

Just 3 months into his first year of schooling, Raag, my five-year-old son, came back from school and shared that he needed me to sign his notebook. A test had been given in school that day. The teacher had written four lines on the topic 'The Cow', and had the children copy those down in the notebook. Apparently, my son had done the grave mistake of copying the fourth line ('the cow has four legs') before the third ('the cow has a tail') and that had warranted an angry slash of the red pen across the page and a 'write it 10 times' punishment. I was expected to sign and acknowledge this 'egregious' mistake, which, as a young mother concerned about the repercussions my defiance would have on my son, I did!

I could sense my son's fear and confusion and, I guess for me, that experience must have planted the first seed of disillusionment with this approach to learning. I can vividly recall my growing frustration with the daily mindless assignments that Raag would bring back home. In my great enthusiasm to support his learning, I realized it was only causing more pain, as my frustration at the system was affecting my son!

For any suggestions on changing anything, Raag would respond, ‘No Mama, the teacher told me to do it like this.’

And then came the last straw...

It was the first parent–teacher meeting at school, and I was super–excited to know what my son enjoyed, who his friends were, and what he found challenging. I landed early, chatted with the other parents and waited for my turn.

I still remember the teacher’s face, bored and listless, as she did not even make an attempt to recall my son’s name!



‘What is his roll number?’

That was the day I took my son out of school.



‘Raag Sethi!’ I responded with indignation. He had already been in this school, in her class, for three months; she taught him every day, and yet, she did not know his name! Undeterred, she asked, again, ‘What is his roll number?’

That was the day I took my son out of school.

As a student of design at the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, I was taught to keep the end-user at the centre of all design decisions. After graduation, the experience in running a design firm taught me that the most effective way of finding the optimum solution for the user depends on how deeply one understands the user, the empathy and integrity one brings to understanding the actual need, and how intentionally these insights are used to shape the solution.

It was the birth of my son that got me deeply involved in his education. Coming from a design perspective, I was dismayed by the existing pedagogical methods that made

I saw the insidious way the system shifted his mindset from 'I CAN' to 'CAN I?'

the child merely **incidental** to the process of teaching. I witnessed first-hand a system that rewarded compliance over conversation and passivity over curiosity. He was turning into an 'obedient' boy—devoid of spunk, joy or a voice. I saw the insidious way the system shifted his mindset from 'I CAN' to 'CAN I?'

Had I not graduated with an education in design I would have written off Raag's experience as the common experience that everyone goes through, and continued with the school. After all, I had also experienced similar schooling—passive, compliant and singularly unremarkable!

Fortunately, I experienced the exact opposite at NID. Learning was alive and challenging; it demanded participation and shaped my purpose. It opened my heart, mind and eyes to the power of 'what if' and empowered me with the skills and competencies to do something about 'what is'.

This is the genesis of my story!

Riverside, when I started it, was an act of faith. There had to be a better way to educate our children. Learning must be more than marks and degrees. Schools must be a place where children grow, thrive and graduate as empowered humane citizens. Not by chance—but by *design*.

What began as a mother's concern for her child's education, has over the past two decades, evolved into a deep and

compelling imperative to change the existing system: to ensure that meaning and purpose in learning are achieved not by *mere chance* for some children, but by *design* for *all* children.

People have often asked if I was daunted by the enormity of the challenge of starting a school and have questioned my lack of ‘qualifications’ to be an educator. To both very appropriate questions, I have always responded with a humble ‘no’.



**But as a designer,
I responded with
confidence.**



As a *mother*, I reacted with frustration and anger to my son’s experience. If I stopped there, I would have chosen one of two options: change his school and hope for a better experience or resign myself to the system and

reconcile with the situation. But as a designer, I responded with confidence.

Rather than blaming and complaining, I saw the opportunity to question the status quo, to use my skills and the design process to offer the ‘user’ (in this case, my son) an educational experience that nourished him with values, skills and competencies that would unleash his agency and make him thrive. For this challenge, I felt eminently skilled and competent.

Of course, I was also acutely aware of the need to dive deep into the field of educational theory and practice. This quest started twenty years ago and has continued to this day: travelling the world; visiting top schools; observing and interviewing teachers; teaching and iterating and unashamedly asking questions; and reading, reading, reading

educational theories (from J. Krishnamurti and Gijubhai Badheka to Reggio Emilia and, my personal favourite, Dr Howard Gardner).

I released the advertisement for the launch of Riverside on 18 January 2001 and my team (all three of us) waited patiently by the telephone, hoping someone would call!! While there was no stampede for admissions, we were so grateful that there were twenty parents who expressed an interest in knowing more about the school. Excited to show them what we had to offer, share our vision and show the parents that we actually had a school building, we set up our first parent meeting on 26 January at the school, and then, the universe decided to send me a sign.

**The ground
shook with an
8.0 magnitude
earthquake
that hit Gujarat
...and that
day changed
everything!**

At 8.40 a.m. on the 26 January 2001, just as I was about to leave home for the meeting at the school, the ground shook with an 8.0 magnitude earthquake that hit Gujarat. That day was to be our first day at school, the first introduction to Riverside, the first meeting with parents—and that day changed everything!

What transpired in the next months has been well-documented, but suffice it to say that everything collapsed. While the school building luckily withstood the tremors, several parents who had expressed interest left the city and my friend who was to be my ally in this journey left the country. Suddenly, it seemed that before I had even started, it was all over!

Someone once asked me why I stayed and continued on this journey. In all honesty, I don't have a clear response. However, in hindsight, I am eternally grateful for the decision to soldier on. It offered me an opportunity to test my resolve, and see if I had what it takes to really commit



**For me, 26th
January was my
I CAN test!**



to this idea. It helped me find a deep pool of strength and resilience within, which gave me perspective to overcome the several 'earthquakes' that the last twenty years have brought and the ability to find firm ground over and over

again. For me, 26 January was my I CAN test!

Today, 20 years down, Riverside is seen as a globally renowned centre of excellence and innovation with the arc of Riverside encompassing much more than just the journey of the school. In 2007, we started aProCh, a bold initiative to make our cities more child-friendly. In 2009, Riverside launched Design for Change, today, the world's largest movement that empowers children with the tools to design solutions to change their world. And, in 2015, we established the Riverside Learning Center, to offer a comprehensive blueprint for schools to contextualise and implement our design-led approach in their settings, which is already serving schools in nine countries!

WHY THIS BOOK, AND WHY NOW?

The aim of the book is to present the story of how Riverside went from an act of faith to a demonstration of possibility. It is a story of how the design process underpinned all

decisions to build an enduring, impactful institution. It is not the school's biography but a collection of lessons, anecdotes, case studies and insights on how Riverside was 'designed' and how the design-led approach evolved.

The last 20 years have been a study and testing of how the design process can craft a pedagogy of 'intentionality'. We call this our **'I CAN approach'** to education. The approach demonstrates that if you are anchored by strong values and design processes which shape culture, build with the learner and timetable for both content and character, you **will** graduate not just achievers, but humane citizens who are empowered with the core belief that they must effect positive change in their communities.

More importantly, the story of Riverside is not mine alone. It is a demonstration and evidence of collective will, unflagging stamina, and a deep, unwavering commitment to the power of possibility. It is the story of an inspired and maverick team—from the first 5 intrepid adventurers (Parul, Nandini, Jhanvi and Phoram, and myself) who embarked on this journey to build the bricks of this idea, to the current inspired and passionate 75 EduHeroes (my dream team of teachers, my formidable champions, Deepa, my faithkeeper and leader, and the entire support team) who are shaping the Riverside story with continued intention and attention. It is also a testament to the faith and belief of our parents

who entrust us with their most precious wards, and even if they don't always know what we do, they continue to believe in what they see their children do!

**I can't think
of a more
compelling
reason to run a
school!**



*A glimpse of the
Riverside Story*

The recent pandemic has only strengthened my belief that schools can be, and should be more than just institutions for ‘passing tests and time’.

They are the last standing bastions of hope where children will learn about equity, justice, joy and purpose, and where they learn that they indeed CAN!

I can't think of a more compelling reason to run a school!

