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Leaving Nothing to Chance

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Principals from high-performing, high-poverty, and high-minority schools discuss what it takes to ensure that all students achieve.



A myth plagues the United States that low-income students and students of color arrive at school so damaged that schools cannot be expected to help them achieve at high levels. Early this year, the lieutenant governor of South Carolina gave voice to this myth: "You show me the school that has the highest free and reduced [-price] lunch," he said, "and I'll show you the worst test scores."

Certainly it's true that, *in general*, high-poverty and high-minority schools are low achieving. However, some schools with what are called "challenging" student bodies excel at helping their students achieve. These schools offer hope that all is not lost in the essential bargain that the United States offers its citizens: a fair start for all children.

Doing Everything Right

I have spent the last six years identifying and visiting almost two dozen high-performing high-poverty and high-minority schools across the United States to try to figure out what makes them more successful than ordinary schools. My theory is that if we fully understood what they do, more schools could follow in their footsteps. The schools I'm drawing on here all won the Education Trust's Dispelling the Myth award for educating low-income and minority students to high academic levels.

The schools I studied

- Had substantial enrollment of low-income students and students of color.
- Had high absolute achievement (nearly all students met or exceeded state standards).
- Had high relative achievement (larger percentages of low-income students and students of color met or exceeded standards than in other schools in their respective states).
- Did not have entrance standards for students (that is, no magnet schools or schools requiring entrance exams or teacher recommendations were included).
- For the most part, were regular neighborhood schools.

These schools succeed by doing just about everything right, from classroom management to curriculum to assessment to discipline.

It isn't easy to do everything right. But the educators in these schools know that their students are particularly vulnerable to sloppy or inadequate instruction in a way that many middle-class children are not. As a result, they operate on a higher plane than many middle-class schools that can count on their students' families to make up for deficiencies in teaching or curriculum.

Five Insights for Success

It will come as no surprise that each of these schools has a leader with valuable, hard-won knowledge. Five insights emerged from extensive interviews with these leaders.

1. It's everyone's job to run the school.

Asked how she could focus on student achievement when a crisis erupted in the lunchroom or a bathroom ceiling collapsed, Elain Thompson, who led enormous improvement at P.S. 124 in Queens, New York, replied that it wasn't up to her alone. Addressing the lunchroom crisis or seeing that the ceiling got fixed "was someone else's job." Every problem in the school fell under the purview of a staff member. It was Thompson's job to make sure there was a capable adult who could solve the problem. This is how she was able to keep her focus on student achievement rather than on the daily crises that often consume principals.

Another high-achieving principal—Sharon Brittingham, who led the transformation of Frankford Elementary School in rural Delaware from a low-performing school to one of the top-performing schools in the state—says that many principals find it easier to stay mired in day-to-day crises. By solving all the problems that emerge—the lunchroom runs out of French fries or the 6th grade field trip's charter buses are late—principals experience quick successes and get staff members' approbation. Now a principal coach throughout the state, Brittingham calls that approach "majoring in the minors." She notes that it's difficult for principals to leave the day-to-day issues in someone else's hands in order to focus on the major issues of improving instruction. But keeping a laserlike focus on instruction is the only way for schools to improve.

Because this approach requires competence at every level, principals bring rigor to hiring decisions. Each new teacher and staff member must be part of a team that is continually improving. The interview process for new teachers takes "a long time," said Molly Bensinger-Lacy, former principal of Graham Road Elementary, which she led from being one of the lowest-performing schools in Fairfax County, Virginia, in 2004 to one of the highest-performing schools in the state four years later.

Bensinger-Lacy's expectations for teachers included the following:

- Participating in professional learning communities.
- Teaching during at least one of the intersessions in what was then a year-round school.
- Participating in after-school classes in reading and math.
- Taking on extra responsibilities beyond classroom instruction, such as sponsoring a club or helping lead a professional development session.
- Keeping up with professional literature and research.

Laying out these expectations in detail—in addition to gauging prospective teachers' willingness to collaborate closely with colleagues on mapping out curriculum, planning lessons, developing formative assessments, and studying data in detail—is part of what made the interview process so lengthy. With few exceptions, this approach ensured that schools like Graham Road hired the right teachers.

These principals also take tenure decisions seriously. In too many schools, teachers receive their third or fourth contract without serious evaluation, meaning that they drift into tenure protections. The New Teacher Project found that only 1 percent of teachers had had 60 minutes or more of observation before their final evaluation.¹ In contrast, teachers who earn tenure protection in the schools I studied have demonstrated not only competence and caring, but also an ability and willingness to keep honing their skills. Administrators frequently observe in their classrooms. In addition, because teachers are part of

active professional communities such as grade-level teams and vertical articulation teams (across grade levels), they don't teach in isolation.

Ultimately, this mandate for excellence holds for everyone in the building, from the school secretaries who must efficiently process paperwork and welcome parents and visitors, to the cafeteria workers who must provide nutritious food in a welcoming atmosphere, to the paraprofessionals who support instruction. They are all part of creating a school with high student achievement.

Agnes "Terri" Tomlinson, principal of George Hall Elementary School, which went from being one of the lowest-performing schools in Mobile, Alabama, in 2004, to achieving recognition as a top Alabama school in 2008, said, "Most principals don't realize that support staff can be your undertakers—they will bury you."

The correlate of making sure that "the right people are on the bus," as Jim Collins put it in *Good to Great* (HarperBusiness, 2001), is that each staff member has an opportunity to help make significant decisions within his or her purview of responsibility. Principals might, for example, encourage teachers to make important decisions related to classroom instruction, such as what phonics program to use or how to use Title I dollars.

2. Inspect what you expect—and expect that all students will meet or exceed standards.

Valarie Lewis, who followed Elaine Thompson as principal of P.S. 124 in Queens, explains one of the keys to her success: verifying that everyone in the building is doing his or her job. "Inspect what you expect," she says.

According to Lewis and her peers, it is not enough for principals to simply set clear expectations that all students will succeed. They must provide the critical eye, the evaluative sense, that ensures that all educators in the school continually monitor their own results against their goals so they can improve.

For example, these school leaders may leave the question of which phonics program to adopt to the kindergarten and 1st grade teachers. But they continually look at reading assessment data and watch classrooms to see whether the program is doing what it's supposed to do: help all students learn to decode. If some students still falter, it's the principal's job to monitor their progress and ask what other interventions the teachers are introducing. If teachers pool their knowledge and still come up short, it's up to the principal to know what training would help the teachers better do their jobs and then make sure they get it, whether it's bringing in an expert on vocabulary acquisition or sending teachers to a conference focused on differentiating instruction or improving reading fluency.

Dannette Collins, a teacher at George Hall Elementary in Mobile, Alabama, says that what she most values about her principal is that she "makes sure everyone does their work." In other schools where she has taught, Collins said, the principals didn't bother noticing whether teachers who agreed to take on a responsibility, such as developing materials for a commonly taught lesson, actually fulfilled it. She and other conscientious teachers were left feeling overwhelmed; not only did they have to do their own jobs, but they also had to pick up the slack of others who didn't—or risk harming students. This sense of being among the few people who actually do their jobs contributes to teacher burnout.

But exactly how do principals in these schools hold people accountable? Too often in U.S. schools, the only choice has seemed to be between zero accountability and a harsh, martinet-like system of control where people are told what to do and are punished if they don't follow orders. The school leaders described here have developed a different approach that may lie at the heart of what distinguishes them from other, less successful principals. It could be called ...

3. Be relentlessly respectful—and respectfully relentless.

Despite their distinctive styles, all these school leaders consciously attempt to model for their teachers and students the way free citizens should treat one another in a democracy—with tolerance, respect, and high expectations. Take, for example, Deb Gustafson, who in 2001 took over as principal of Ware Elementary, the first school in Kansas to be put "on improvement" because of its low achievement. The school she inherited had an atmosphere of disrespect, and student suspensions and teacher grievances were commonplace.

That fall, when teachers arrived for work, Gustafson began to transform the negative tone. "I told the teachers that I would never reprimand them for anything except speaking to children inappropriately," she remembers. "This is how you will talk to kids, I told them, no matter how disrespectfully they speak to you." When teachers responded that they were only reacting to students' disrespectful remarks, Gustafson said that it's grown-ups, not students, who are responsible for setting the tone of schools. To help teachers understand what she expected, she led a book study of *Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control in the Classroom* (Love and Logic Press, 1995) by Jim Fay and David Funk.

This respect carries over to dealing with teachers. Gustafson assumes that all teachers want to be successful. That's easy enough when teachers *are* successful. The test comes when they're not. At Ware, if specific teachers struggle, Gustafson or her assistant principal talks with them at length about their plans to succeed with each student and how they might improve their knowledge and skills. It can be a difficult conversation that involves reviewing each student's achievement data and noting that, for example, a student who did well the previous year with another teacher is now faltering in the new classroom.

In this conversation, respectful relentlessness means that school leaders establish the professional expectation that every student will meet or exceed state standards and that those students who surpass the standards need further intellectual challenges, such as reading more complicated books or writing in-depth term papers. Their relentless respect means that they assume that teachers want to be successful, so teachers whose students fail to meet or exceed standards receive support. Those who don't improve face other tough conversations, such as whether they think they would be more successful in another field; several teachers who concluded that they would be more successful elsewhere have left the profession.

In Michigan's Godwin Heights, assistant superintendent Arelis Diaz formally evaluates each lagging teacher every year. "The union asks me, 'When are you going to stop evaluating?' and I say, 'When [the teacher] can show me achievement results.'"

The leaders in these schools bring urgency to such discussions. They understand that if their students do not have a good education, they may face lives of poverty and dependence. They know that school leaders must be guardians of their students' futures, not of their staff members' happiness. "It's the job of a principal to make a marginal teacher uncomfortable," says one principal. Another says, "No one has the right to waste a day in the life of a child."

But high-performing principals also know they must support teachers. In the observation system that principal Diane Scricca instituted at Long Island's Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School, whenever a teacher is observed—seven times a year for new teachers and a minimum of two times a year for veterans—the observer gives many "commendations." These consist of specific things that the teacher is doing right, from establishing a good rapport with students to leading a strong opening activity. The evaluator then gives one or two "recommendations" that the teacher is expected to work on before the next observation, with concrete ideas about how to proceed. If the teacher needs to improve the kinds of questions he or she asks, for example, that teacher might be steered to the classrooms of veteran

teachers who excel in their questioning techniques. If the teacher makes no effort to improve and doesn't visit the recommended classrooms, then the hard conversation begins.

As part of their "relentless respect" for staff members, effective principals steer clear of arbitrary decisions based on personal preference. For example, the principal of George Hall Elementary School said that although she prefers orderly classrooms, she recognizes that some teachers can succeed in more relaxed environments. So, despite her personal preference, she does not criticize teachers because their chairs are not in straight rows and their binders are askew—as long as their students are learning.

4. Use student achievement data to evaluate decisions.

These schools use student achievement data to either confirm or reconsider decisions. For example, several years ago, Capitol View Elementary in Atlanta, Georgia, decided to tackle its students' relatively low performance on state tests of science knowledge. The team members in charge of spending the school's federal Title I dollars decided that in addition to buying lab tables, stools, and microscopes, they would hire a science teacher to do laboratory experiments with the students. The following year, the staff members looked at the students' higher science scores as evidence that they had made the right decision. If they had seen little or no improvement, they would have rethought their approach and adjusted their program.

Because this practice has not been the norm for educators in the past, it often falls to the principal to help teachers learn to sift through student data without feeling defensive and under attack. When Bensinger-Lacy first became principal of Graham Road Elementary, she led teachers in examining classroom data, searching for patterns of success and failure. For example, she helped teachers find which of their peers excelled with helping their students add three-digit numbers and which had the most success teaching students to write essays. She then made sure that the less successful teachers had opportunities to learn from their more successful peers. Similarly, after one midyear kindergarten data meeting that recognized a teacher for her expertise in teaching students all their letters, this teacher did a workshop for her fellow teachers—complete with shaving cream and modeling clay—to demonstrate how she taught this skill.

It took a while for teachers to realize that the point was not to find fault but to establish the professional expectation that every student will achieve and, when students fail, to pinpoint ways to improve.

5. Do whatever it takes to make sure students learn.

One final lesson that many of the highly successful leaders talk about is to do whatever it takes.

When Agnes Tomlinson took over George Hall Elementary in 2004 after the Mobile Public School System reconstituted the school—meaning that all staff members had to reapply for their jobs—she found that some disgruntled former employees had trashed the building. With the help of her assistant principal and a maintenance worker, she spent the summer clearing the school of debris.

In the middle of a difficult transition, Tomlinson couldn't do what she was able to do later on: rely on other staff members to do their jobs. In a completely broken school, she found herself, literally, doing the repair work needed to create the right environment for teaching and learning.

Their Best Hope

The leaders in these schools know it's up to them to create the conditions under which their kids will learn. "We become students' advocates," said one principal, "because they have no one else to demand the best from them."

Endnote

¹ See *The Widget Effect*, by the New Teacher Project, 2009. Available: <http://widgeteffect.org>

Author's note: This article was adapted from a forthcoming paper on leadership to be published by the Education Trust. The Wallace Foundation has supported the Education Trust's leadership work; this paper, however, does not necessarily represent the foundation's views.

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