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Today's Effective Schools Have High-Capacity Leadership

The ability to set high expectations while building a professional partnership with teachers is the hallmark of a successful principal.

CAN THERE BE any doubt left that school leadership is the most important variable in school improvement?

Just read the professional literature. Studies are pouring out of university research centers and education think-tanks, comparing high- and low-achieving schools with similar demographics. Time after time these studies come to the same conclusion. Schools that beat the odds, close the achievement gaps, and accelerate the performance of *all* students are schools with highly effective leaders.

Chances are that when we wrote *school leadership* above, many readers automatically translated that phrase into *principal leadership*. But, as the research is revealing, the simple "school = principal" leadership equation doesn't balance in today's performance-driven educational environment.

A more accurate summary of the research findings would be that *highly effective principals are successful because they know how to create many highly effective leaders within their schools.*

In the recent report *Supporting Principals Who Break Ranks,* the National Association of Secondary School Principals finds that: "Although the commitment and skill of principals are essential to create and sustain a high-quality school in which every student meets rigorous academic standards and has meaningful connections to the school, commitment and skill alone are not sufficient."

Montgomery principal Mike Lenhart, whose story begins on page 3 of this issue, puts it this way: "People have said I'm a strong principal, and I think I am, but I'm not naïve. If I come in here and I think I can do it all by myself, I'm destined to fail. So my focus is on building...a team strong enough so that when I go away, there will be enough institutionalized processes that [this school] can survive on its own. I think that's what a great principal does."

In her 2003 book *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*, author Linda Lambert describes today's effective schools as places where principals have learned to share leadership in ways that actually build the school's capacity to excel.

"A principal's vision, standing

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ONTHEWEB

How To Build a Learning Community

Here's a great resource for exploring the concept of professional learning communities. Developed by the Eisenhower National Clearinghouse and the National Staff Development Council, this webpage includes annotated links to key articles about PLC's, including several by leadership experts Rick DuFour and Robert Eaker.

http://tinyurl.com/23d6t

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Working Toward Excellence is a quarterly publication of the Alabama *Best Practices Center.* The Best Practices Center, located in Montgomery, works to identify and promote promising education practices, with an emphasis on staff development for teachers and administrators. It collaborates with existing organizations such as the State Department of Education, higher education, local school systems and schools, the regional inservice centers and others. It is facilitated with the generous support of the Alabama Power Foundation, the BellSouth Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, the Kaul Foundation, the Junior League of Birmingham and the State of Alabama. For more information, call (334) 279-1886.

John Norton,
Writer and Editor

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alone, needs to be 'sold' and 'bought into,'" she writes. "By contrast, a *shared* vision based upon the core values of participants and their hopes for the school ensures commitment to its realization. Realizing a shared purpose or vision is an energizing experience for participants, and a shared vision is the unifying force for participants working collaboratively."

Lambert says that schools with "high leadership capacity" have these characteristics:

- Principal, teachers, parents, and students are skillful leaders
- Shared vision results in program coherence
- Questions are posed and data is analyzed to inform decisions and practice
- Broad involvement, collaboration, and collective responsibility are reflected in roles and actions
- Reflective practice leads consistently to innovation
- The school has high or steadily improving student achievement

In schools without such capacity, says Lambert, one finds a situation where the principal, rather than the school community, is consistently called upon to solve problems, make decisions, and provide all the answers. In such a situation, she adds, "dependency behaviors on the part of the staff actually increase." School performance is defined as "the principal's problem."

In another story (p. 10) in this issue, Jennifer Huckaby, a first-year reading coach at Wellborn Elementary School on the outskirts of Anniston, reflects on the emergence of teacher leaders in her school and the impact of this capacity-building on principal Nancy Grogan. In the past, says Huckaby, "I think she was always expected to bring it all to the table, and she tried to live up to our expectation." Today, Grogan is not only a strong moral force in the school but a principal who has learned "the wisdom in distributing power."

During our conversation, Huckaby offered an observation that is critically important when one considers principals who share leadership. "For an outsider looking in, it may seem like a weakness when a principal turns over some of her power to her staff. But this is what effective leaders do today. They know how to distribute leadership and *still keep stoking the fires.*"

Balanced leadership

At the Alabama Best Practices Center, we are always searching for "break-through" schools. They may be high-poverty schools where educators are defying the conventional wisdom that "these kids can't learn." Or they may be schools in more prosperous communities where educators refuse to rest on their laurels and will not be satisfied until every student is learning at high levels. Whatever their demographics may be, all the break-through schools we have visited have this in common: *They have a principal who knows how to build a collaborative partnership with and among teachers, while still communicating the message: "We will make no excuses."*

This balancing act — this ability to set high expectations while building a professional partnership with teachers — is the hallmark of today's successful principal.

Without enough *partnership*, strong, visionary principals may find themselves where Nancy Grogan found herself. "I thought if I've got the vision, and the vision seems right — if it's focused on our students, if I have high expectations for everyone, including myself, if we use research-based strategies, then we'll be okay." Off she went, full speed ahead, says Grogan. "Then all of a sudden you look back and see you've got a few hanging on with you, but you're moving too fast." Forceful leadership may produce compliance, but it rarely breeds understanding and ownership.

On the other hand, without the *pressure of high expectations*, collaboration may never move beyond a surface activity. Principal coach Julie Hannah has this to say in our story (p. 6) about the Alabama Reading Initiative's principal leadership program.

"I have been in schools where teachers are collaborating like crazy," Hannah says, but the schools are not getting results. Teachers are still making excuses for students' failure to learn. "You can read all the books and do all the strategies, but until you genuinely raise your expectations, you will not excel."

Grogan agrees. "Somebody has to say, 'We're not getting it done.' And many times, that's the principal. I have to be the messenger for the data."

In our interview with Grogan (page 10), she recounts an incident last fall when she and Wellborn's first-grade teachers had to go "behind closed doors" and have a frank conversation about unsatisfactory results. In days gone by, such a conversation might have created an unbreachable chasm between principal and faculty. What has changed, Grogan says, is that Wellborn's teachers have transformed from hard-working teachers who believe they are doing "the best we can with what we have," to sure-footed professionals who know they can solve the learning problems in the school. That shift, she says, "has really made it possible for me to share leadership at a level I could not have imagined eight or 10 years ago."

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With "No Excuses" Leadership, a High-Poverty School Aims for the Top

With the help of a strong leadership team and an increasingly involved community, a retired soldier shines as a first-year principal in inner-city Montgomery.

TODAY'S SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALS must be instructional leaders.

But in the real world of school, a principal — no matter how gifted in the area of academic leadership — must have something else. Call it "the human touch," or a talent for helping students, teachers and parents "be all they can be." And who better to do that than a retired Army officer?

Well, perhaps not just any retired Army officer. But we've found one in Montgomery County that fits the bill. Let's begin with a story.

When I arrive in the parking lot of E.D. Nixon Elementary School (whose appealing architecture and well-groomed appearance create a lighthouse effect in this inner-city Montgomery neighborhood), principal Mike Lenhart is standing at curbside talking to two Montgomery police officers. It's 7:30 on Monday morning and a family feud that erupted over the weekend is in danger of spreading into Nixon's hallways.

Although I've yet to speak to Lenhart, his invitational style is apparent in his body language. There's little visible tension in the conversation taking place among Lenhart, the two policemen, and a woman who turns out to be the potential troublemaker. Lenhart, a retired lieutenant colonel, projects a positive, respectful attitude toward her as they begin to move the conversation inside. A few minutes later, as I sit in Lenhart's office waiting my turn, a slow parade of parents, students, administrators and police fill a small adjoining conference room. Through the closed door I can hear only muffled conversation, but there's no shouting or angry name-calling. One voice, more resonant than the rest, is quietly but firmly sorting things out. It's a leader's voice.

A safe, inviting school

Twenty minutes later the crisis has passed, and Mike Lenhart is sitting next to me in a matching armchair. "One thing I do well is keep school safe and free of surprises," he says. "Our biggest challenge is parents. They feel disenfranchised and don't see school as a helpful place. But I've won over most of them."

Winning over "most of them" is no small feat for a first-year principal just seven months into the job. When Lenhart began his tour of duty at Nixon last fall, "parents were in the habit of coming in at any time, walking the halls and going into classrooms with impunity." He quickly established some ground rules. "Parents know that if they don't sign in, in one way or another they're going to have to deal with me. If they start following the rules, we'll gladly let them go to the classrooms. If not, I send them a letter and tell them they can't come here anymore." He smiles. "And that usually precipitates a conference, and we get it settled and then everything's okay after that."

The 55-year-old Lenhart did not follow the usual lengthy path to the principalship. When he retired from the Army in 1994, he wanted to "do something that I felt would still be meaningful." During his final posting at nearby Maxwell Air Force Base, he became interested in youth activities, and after retirement he returned to the base to coach a Special Olympics bowling team. "It finally dawned on me," he says, "that working with kids was what I liked."

Taking advantage of the federal Troops to Teachers program, Lenhart enrolled in a two-year master's program at Auburn University at Montgomery and also volunteered daily in an inner-city elementary school. "I went to the principal and said 'I want to be a teacher, and I want to volunteer at your school every day for the next two years while I get my master's degree. Because if I don't like it, I don't want to waste two years of my time and then find out I don't like it.' And she said 'You're a smart man.'"

Lenhart liked it. After winning AUM's award for outstanding new elementary teacher, he accepted a sixth-grade position at a Title I

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ONTHEWEB

"Balanced Leadership"
Subtitled "What Thirty Years of Research Tells Us About the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement," this report by Robert Marzano and others (McREL, 2003) identifies 21 key leadership responsibilities that are significantly correlated with higher student achievement. (Download free PDF file at this page.)

http://tinyurl.com/27bu3

"No Excuses" Leadership
Continued from page 3.

elementary school in North Montgomery. During the next four years, he sharpened his teaching skills and helped implement a comprehensive reform initiative in the school — an experience that heightened his interest in becoming a principal.

Lenhart spent the next year earning a degree in education administration while working as curriculum assistant (a K-8 position similar to assistant principal) at a "tough" Montgomery middle school that "presented a lot of challenges." With his degree completed, Lenhart was offered a district-level position in neighboring Lowndes County as high school supervisor. Lenhart hadn't been in a high school since his Colorado graduation in 1966, "but they wanted somebody who could be tough when tough was needed, and who knew good instruction when they saw it," he says.

Lenhart's itch for hands-on leadership led him to accept a second assignment in Lowndes County, developing a alternative middle school for what the district superintendent called "at-promise" students. The school, dubbed "Project Success," gave Lenhart ample opportunities to experiment with cutting-edge curriculum and instruction, and to interact regularly with students, parents and community members who led difficult lives. By the time he left two years later to accept the principal's post at E. D. Nixon Elementary, Project Success had been recognized by state evaluators as one of the state's best at-risk programs.

"We've got to succeed in schools like this"

Lenhart's decision to accept the Nixon assignment isn't surprising, given his view of his second career as a social mission. "I didn't want to go to an eastside Montgomery school," he says. "If public education is going to succeed, it's got to succeed in schools like this. I started off in a school that had academic difficulties, and I had worked in them all along. I realized that I don't want to be anywhere else."

Nixon's past academic performance had placed the school in a precarious position on the ALSDE priority school roster — just a step away from a state takeover. When Lenhart accepted the principal's job last summer, he told district leaders that "I don't care about the test scores. I came here to make this school the best school in this city — maybe in this state. I think I can build the academic team that will help us get there. If we pay attention to the data and focus on learning, the scores will take care of themselves."

Lenhart came to high-poverty Nixon Elementary with three priorities in mind. Establish a safe, stable environment. Set expectations for students and take steps to build their confidence in their own abilities. And identify the teachers who were willing to work differently and give them the training and resources they needed to break the cycle of low achievement.

"I've tried to take testing pressure off the teachers by letting them know that I focus on learning," Lenhart says. "And the way we determine if our students are learning is to gather data, look at it, and see if what we're doing is having any success. We share our successes and we quit doing what isn't working."

"We're already a good school," he says, "and we're going to be a great school. What I want to do is to demonstrate that a school like this can achieve at high levels."

Nixon is part of the Alabama Reading First Initiative. The program is underwritten by major federal grants, and schools that qualify receive $200,000 a year to purchase research-based reading programs and support in-depth staff development. Like teachers in other ARFI and Alabama Reading Initiative schools, Nixon's faculty uses the DIBELS reading assessment system to "progress monitor" every student's growth. Through the use of one-minute in-class tests, DIBELS helps teachers identify specific pieces of the reading puzzle that students are having trouble solving. Once they teachers have this information, they've been trained to use small-group and one-on-one instruction to tailor lessons that address the problems.

Many leaders in ARFI and ARI schools say that once teachers develop the habit of using data to make decisions about reading instruction, the practice begins to spread to other areas of the curriculum. In Alabama, this evolutionary process has been accelerated by the ALSDE leadership academy 's statewide workshops on data-driven decisionmaking, which have trained teams from more than 850 schools. (See page 5.) Lenhart says his team found the academy experience, which helps schools tie multiple sources of data to their school improvement planning process, "a tremendous help in finding weaknesses in our program that were not known before."

After months of hard work, Nixon's teachers "are starting to see that the data is the key to building a successful student body. When we have our meetings, they go back to their classrooms with specific plans to implement, and then the next time we meet we see if it worked, and if it did, we keep doing it. If it didn't, we take another approach."

Hands-on instructional leadership

Mike Lenhart believes that to be a successful principal in today's high-pressure school environment, you must spend a lot of time in classrooms keeping tabs on the quality of

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Alabama Leadership Academy

Today's Principals Can't Afford to "Feel Like the Lone Ranger"

It's a tradition that stretches back to the earliest days of principal professional development, and it's still common today. Leadership programs bring principals together in a central location, stage a few workshops, and then send them back to school and expect them to make a difference. "I call it the Lone Ranger model of leadership development," says David Hill, director of the State Leadership Academies Network at the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board.

Hill believes it's a failed strategy. "I would challenge any program using this model to measure the impact that principals have on student achievement as a result of this kind of training. They won't find much."

The Academies Network is an outgrowth of SREB's School Leadership Initiative, which is partnering with universities and state departments of education across the Southeast to redesign leadership programs using the best research on successful schools. One clear message found in the research: *Schools excel when principals and teachers work together in leadership teams to improve curriculum and instruction.*

At a time when policymakers and the public expect all students to learn at high levels, Hill says, leadership academies must shift their focus from grooming individual leaders to preparing leadership teams with the skills, knowledge and staying power to drive positive change.

"When you carry a team with you to academy training, you develop a core group of people who are committed to the fundamental redesign of the school," he says. "Those people can help sell the faculty by demonstrating their own commitment to the plan. The size of that group grows and grows until you have the kind of commitment that can turn the whole school around."

John Bell, director of the Alabama State Leadership Academy, agrees. The academy is a charter member of the SREB Initiative, and its program design has been heavily influenced by the relationship. In the fall of 2002, the academy (housed in the State Department of Education's school improvement division) began requiring principals to bring teacher leaders to all ALA professional development activities.

In the early months of the 2003-04 school year, the Academy helped principal-teacher teams from more than 850 schools learn to use a variety of student and school data to identify weaknesses in school performance and craft specific plans to address them. In anticipation of this major data-training effort, Bell says, the ALSDE "rewrote the school improvement process for the state of Alabama" to tie the planning document more tightly to each school's performance statistics.

"In the past, we'd always handed them some test results and said 'Figure out your problems and fix them'," Bell says. "Now we're helping school teams learn the process for determining what the data is telling them, *and* we're helping them learn how to go back and link it to the school environment."

To accomplish this massive professional development effort, the ALA trained facilitators from school district staffs across the state who then worked with school teams at regional workshops hosted by the state's 11 Regional Inservice Centers. ALA used this same strategy in a joint effort with the Alabama Reading Initiative to train 660 school teams in "Leading for Literacy." The goal, Bell says, "was to help principals learn how to move from being a building administrator to being a leader of instruction, around the specific goal of raising student achievement in reading and writing. It was a strong piece, especially for high schools where literacy has not traditionally been seen as part of the job."

School leadership teams were also invited to participate in several book-study workshops, where they received all the materials need to lead book discussions in their own schools. The books included *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, a book about the influence of gender on learning styles; *The Dreamkeepers*, a study of teachers who are successful with children of color; and *No Excuses: 21 Lessons from High Poverty, High Performing Schools*, a book that uses authentic stories to demonstrate that educators can help high-needs children make significant gains in achievement.

As a result of the training, faculty book studies are becoming a commonplace occurrence in Alabama schools. "We found that many schools had never participated in a professional book study together," Bell says. "No one had ever thought of doing that or considered it a kind of professional development. But these kinds of collaborative studies can really start some important conversations about teaching and learning."

Bell says this year's large-scale, thematic approach to training allowed the Leadership Academy to have a significant impact on principals and faculties in more than two-thirds of Alabama's schools. "We focused on two critical issues in our state – literacy and data-driven decisionmaking. Next fall we're going to use the same approach with special education and integrating technology into instruction. That's what's really wonderful about the Academy approach. We now have a structure that allows educators to talk and focus statewide on important leadership issues." ❖

Peer Coaches Help Principals Fit All the Pieces Together

The Alabama Reading Initiative's principal coaching program offers school leaders the skills and knowledge to lead whole-school reform.

ONTHEWEB

Leadership Resources for Teacher Coaches

Many schools in Alabama and across the nation are adopting the teacher-coach model to improve instruction and support teacher collaboration and the development of professional learning communities. Too often, teachers are thrust into coaching roles without adequate leadership preparation. This resource page offers a wealth on online material that can help principals and coaches make the transition to this new strategy for school improvement.

http://tinyurl.com/2nmnf

FOLLOW CANDY MAHAFFEY around Watwood Elementary School for a few minutes and you'll know you're in the presence of an experienced leader who is comfortable and confident in her job. Mahaffey has spent her entire education career at the Talladega County school — nine years as a teacher and 15 years as principal. What keeps the job interesting? Her leadership team says it's her commitment to student success, her competitive spirit, and her ability to examine her own performance with a critical eye.

So when Julie Hannah, a principal coach with the Alabama Reading Initiative, offered to help Mahaffey strengthen her leadership of Watwood's reading program, the veteran principal was ready and willing.

"We were in our fourth year as an ARI school and it was time for our recertification," Mahaffey says. "We had certainly made some progress, but we had never quite taken off. I can see now that we were missing the leadership piece."

In the first years of ARI, principals and teachers usually attended the program's professional development workshops together. As the teachers bore into the Initiative's research-based reading strategies, principals listened and learned, too. However, as both the principals and the ARI's state leaders came to see, there was a real difference between teaching literacy to students and leading a literacy initiative across a whole school.

Over time, ongoing evaluations of the statewide ARI program uncovered a critical fact. While some schools soared thanks to ARI training; others seemed to bog down. The difference, evaluators concluded, was principal leadership. If a principal had the right combination of background, experience and training — if, in fact, the principal could *see the big picture* of literacy development — then the school's achievement scores began to rise. If principals weren't prepared for this new kind of leadership, the scores usually remained flat.

Mahaffey was one of many principals who needed more help. "We needed someone to tell us what was most important for us to know about. We needed someone to help us look at our data, help us identify the strengths and weaknesses in our instruction, and help us understand what to do about any problems we found."

The state ARI budget was stretched thin, but Department of Education leaders managed to earmark enough funds to support four principal coaches during the 2003-04 school year. Each coach serves roughly one quarter of the state, with a "caseload" of about 33 schools that are going through a year-long ARI recertification process.

(Recertification is not a paper-and-pencil activity, but a newly designed professional development experience that principals and teachers often describe as "powerful" and "transformational.")

The coaches are all principals with a track record as successful literacy leaders in their own schools. They've been "loaned" to the Alabama Reading Initiative to offer direct support to their peers. Principal coaches are the latest addition to ARI's support network, which also includes a pool of regional reading coaches — teachers on special assignment who support elementary or secondary schools in each of the state's 11 Regional Inservice Center districts. While the principal coaches work in partnership with the regional reading coaches and often participate in joint site visits, they have a single mandate.

"My job is to support the principal — period," says Hannah, whose coaching region includes the areas served by the inservice centers at the University of Montevallo and Jacksonville State. She is on leave from the Jefferson County school system, where she earned recognition as a "turn-around" principal at Gardendale Elementary School. "My sole focus is to help principals lead

the ARI recertification process. It is a huge, whole-school reform effort, and it has to be managed like one."

During the recertification year, principals are faced with "constant challenges" as they work to create a system of job-embedded professional development and raise the expectations of teachers about what students can achieve. Hannah helps principals think through organizational issues like scheduling, anticipate likely obstacles, and address issues and conflicts that are often churned up during the change process.

Mahaffey says Hannah's support gave her the confidence to step out and lead the literacy reforms in her school. "Before, as a principal, you hoped that you could fool enough (teachers) to get yourself through," she says. "ARI principals weren't getting professional development designed specifically for us. It wasn't anybody's fault, really. We were invited to the staff development programs for the teachers, but we just didn't know what to do with ourselves, and they didn't know what to do with us."

In the new coaching program, Mahaffey says, "They tell us specifically what we're looking for. They tell us how to guide our teachers in reading." Principals learn to do classroom walk-throughs for each of the components in the ARI instructional approach, "and I know so much more because we've learned how to see the things we need to see in these walk-throughs. We've also learned how to conduct grade-level data meetings and guide discussion as teachers share teaching experiences. I know first-hand what I'm supposed to be seeing and what it looks like. I didn't before."

Early in the school year, Hannah and the other principal coaches organized a regular group meeting for their principals, which also served as a professional development workshop. "For the first time, we were able to get behind a closed door with just principals in the room and say, 'I'm kind of clueless here. What *are* we supposed to be doing?'"

Hannah helped principals fit together all the pieces of the ARI reading program, Hannah says. "She helped us understand not only what our reading coaches and resource people were learning, but what we needed to glean from that."

Hannah also went into schools to support principals as they began to apply what they were learning in the principal workshops. Hannah's on-site support was a confidence-builder during the first few data meetings with teachers. "After the first two meetings," Mahaffey says, " I really began to feel comfortable about leading this effort in my school."

Mahaffey has learned how to use data and classroom walk-throughs to gauge instructional effectiveness at each grade level. If the results aren't there, she's fully prepared to challenge her faculty with questions like "What do we really think these kids can do? What are we going to be about?"

Missy Bullen, a reading interventionist at Watwood, says her veteran principal has become a stronger instructional leader. "She's very aware of where the kids are academically and what's going on in their classrooms. She's always walked in the classrooms every day, but now she knows a lot more about what she's looking for. She knows exactly what the lessons are supposed to look like and the exact purpose behind them. And the teachers understand that, and it has a good effect on all of our instruction."

Mahaffey nods in agreement. ""Really, for the first time, I feel like I honestly have my finger on the pulse of what's going on in this school. I honestly know."

From principal to coach

In a quiet restaurant in late afternoon, Julie Hannah is finally getting something to eat. She's spent the day working in two schools, consulting with principals and reading coaches, participating in purposeful classroom walk-throughs, and observing meetings where principals and teachers use student assessment data to root out persistent problems in achievement.

As one might expect, the first year of the ARI principal coaching program has been a learning year. There are no real models for this kind of undertaking. The coaches' job description is a work in progress, shaped and reshaped as coaches gain more insight into the needs of their schools. "We're figuring it out as we go," Hannah says. "There was no design or track record to build on."

"At the beginning of the school year, I went everywhere," Hannah recalls. Her early contact with the 33 principals in her group was fairly informal and gave her the opportunity "to develop a personal relationship and some sense of trust." As the year progressed, the coaching job changed. Site visits became more structured and formalized. After elementary schools reported their midyear DIBELS benchmark data to the Department of Education, Hannah and her coaching colleagues shifted most of their attention to those elementaries that were making the least improvement in reading.

Now that the principal coaches have shifted their focus to their highest-need elementary schools, Hannah rarely has the opportunity to visit schools like Watwood that are making significant gains. "I feel kind of bad about that," she says. "They need praise for their successes, and we need to be reminded of what is possible."

If funding were available to hire more principal coaches, Hannah would recommend that each coach

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Today's Effective Schools
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The emergence of professional learning communities

Nancy Grogan describes an interesting dynamic. As teachers become more skillful at addressing the learning needs of all students — even those students who are "hard to teach" — they gain confidence in themselves and are more willing to accept responsibility for their students' (and ultimately, their school's) performance. And strong principals are more likely to share power and ownership with teachers who are demonstrating their ability to identify and solve learning problems.

As the stories in this issue of *Working Toward Excellence* demonstrate, this powerful dynamic is emerging in some schools that participate in the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Reading First Initiative. Why? ARI is built on sound research-based principles. It offers in-depth professional development for teachers, reading coaches and principals. Much of the staff development for teachers is "job-embedded," allowing teachers to try proven strategies in their classrooms with the support of reading coaches and in consultation with teacher colleagues. All ARI and ARFI schools continuously monitor student progress in reading through the use of 60-second, teacher-administered DIBELS assessments. The information from those assessments constantly informs teachers and coaches about the effectiveness of instruction.

All of these elements work together to create conditions that allow an authentic "professional learning community" to emerge in a school. Such a community may *not* emerge, but the conditions are ripe for it to do so.

One of the lessons principal coach Julie Hannah (p. 6) says she has learned this year is that school change needs to begin by targeting a specific content area like reading or writing. "The connection with a specific focus is what really makes school reform work, and that's true whether you're working to improve teaching or strengthen leadership."

In the ARI schools where learning communities are emerging, principals and teachers say that new ways of thinking about the teaching of reading are carrying over into their thinking about other content areas. The basic principles apply to math, or writing, or science: Use research-based teaching strategies. Use classroom assessments to measure teaching effectiveness and to shape your instruction. Use all of the expertise within your own faculty to create an in-house professional development experience that becomes part of the daily life of the school.

WHAT DO GREAT PRINCIPALS DO?

An in-depth study by the Gallup Organization looked at the practices of 143 principals in the United States and Canada. The study included an online talent assessment, an employee engagement study, and teacher and supervisor ratings. The results highlight what great principals do to create a positive work environment at their schools:

- **Great principals establish a nurturing culture.** They demonstrate to students, teachers, and parents that they care about them as human beings. Students work for teachers who care about them, and teachers do the same for principals.

- **Great principals make it a top priority to provide the necessary resources for their staff.** Highly effective principals find out what teachers need to succeed and work hard to provide it. Meeting these needs may be as simple as providing enough construction paper or as complex as organizing community agencies to distribute coats and gloves for needy students. By providing the resources, principals enable teachers to focus on student learning.

- **Great principals develop mutually supportive teams.** They recognize that interdependent teamwork is necessary to student success, and actively seek input from teachers in decisions that affect them.

- **Great principals inspire teachers by openly talking about their mission and vision for the school.** They acknowledge the emotion that goes with teaching. They recruit teachers with a strong sense of mission, and they reinforce that mission. They recognize that teaching is a helping profession, affirming and recognizing teachers' altruistic impulses and efforts for student growth.

- **Great principals recognize people's achievements.** They celebrate the successes of both students and teachers, providing meaningful and individual recognition for those around them. They catch people doing things right and call attention to it.

- **Great principals establish school expectations and standards.** They make student learning an expectation, jointly setting goals with teachers, and they regularly review the progress of teachers and the school toward those goals.

Schools that come to this place in their reform journey have reached "the tipping point," says professional development researcher Mike Schomaker. "The moment when — sometimes quite quickly — people's actions and attitudes change dramatically, and the change spreads like a contagion."

Some final thoughts about leadership

The main work of school leadership is "reculturing," says expert Michael Fullan. School reform is really about "a change in the culture of schools and a change in the culture of teaching."

"We know that when we think about change we have to get ownership, participation, and a sense of meaning on the part of the vast majority of teachers. You can't get ownership through technical means; you have to get it through interaction, through developing people, through attention to what students are learning."

You won't find a stronger advocate for data-driven school improvement than leadership consultant Rick DuFour, who believes that "Leaders must focus on and accept responsibility for results." But DuFour also understands that "data is not what drives us as educators to change or improve."

DuFour reminds us that human beings, and educators in particular, have a fundamental longing to feel that they are making a difference — that the work they do is significant. "This desire to make a difference is the primary reason most educators enter the profession. But while we may enter with high hopes and noble aspirations, it is easy to be worn down by the demands of the job."

Leaders who want to generate results, DuFour says, will recognize the need in educators to "believe we are successful in what we do" and the parallel need to feel a sense of connectedness to a worthy enterprise.

"Perhaps more than ever, schools need leaders who purposefully address these matters of the heart," DuFour writes. "We need leaders who can help create a culture of success by establishing processes to help all teachers clarify a reasonable number of essential learning outcomes. We need leaders who will help schools establish specific, measurable, results-oriented goals and who help each teacher and team understand how they contribute to those goals. We need leaders who tear down the walls of isolation and build a collaborative culture based on teams whose members work together interdependently to achieve common goals." Then DuFour quotes Michael Fullan:

"Leadership, if it is to be effective, has to have an explicit 'making-a-difference' sense of purpose…and be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens people's intrinsic commitment, which is none other than the mobilizing of everyone's sense of moral purpose."

Alabama is fortunate to have many school leaders — in principals' offices, in coaching roles, and in thousands of classrooms across our state — who understand the need to help all educators rely on their moral compasses as they navigate through the often stormy waters of school improvement. Finding more of those leaders — developing them, supporting them, honoring and celebrating them — is certainly our most important work. ❖

LEADERS: DON'T BE FOOLED BY "COLLABORATION LITE"

In an insightful column in the *Journal of Staff Development*, education consultant Rick DuFour cautions principals and school leadership teams not to assume that they have a collaborative culture simply because they feel a sense of camaraderie, share in site-based decision-making, or have a well-organized, smoothly running school. DuFour, who gained national recognition as a highly successful school leader in Illinois, is also the author of *Whatever It Takes: How a Professional Learning Community Responds When Kids Don't Learn.* Here's an excerpt from his JSD column, "The Leading Edge."

Leaders determined to impact student achievement must not settle for congeniality, coordination, delegating responsibilities, or any form of "collaboration lite." They must promote a collaborative culture by defining collaboration in narrow terms: the systematic process in which we work together to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results.

The first key term in this definition is systematic. Teachers are not invited or encouraged to collaborate. Collaboration is embedded in the routine practices of the school. Teachers are organized into teams and provided time to meet during the school day. They are provided specific guidelines and asked to engage in specific activities that help them focus on student achievement. Teams center dialogue around three critical questions:

- What is it we want our students to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How can we improve our current levels of student achievement?

None of this happens by chance. School leaders develop procedures to ensure all staff work together to focus constantly on those key questions.

Second, the process is designed to impact professional practice. Staff members do more than analyze, reflect, discuss, or debate. They use collaboration as a catalyst to change their practices. They continuously look for more effective ways to help all students learn.

Third, the effectiveness of the collaborative process is assessed on results rather than perceptions, projects, or positive intentions. Teams identify and pursue individual specific, measurable, results-oriented goals and look for evidence of student achievement as the barometer of their success. They shift the focus from teacher inputs (for example, whether teachers accomplished their goal of creating a new unit or implementing a new strategy) to student outcomes — evidence that students are learning at higher levels.

…(T)rue collaboration does not happen by chance or by invitation. It happens only when leaders commit to creating the systems that embed collaboration in the routine practices of the school and when they provide teachers and teams with the information and support essential to improve practice.

Excerpted from: "'Collaboration Lite' puts student achievement on a starvation diet," *Journal of Staff Development* (Fall 2003)

A Veteran Principal Learns the Value of Shared Leadership

After years of leading from the front office, Nancy Grogan is releasing her "tight grip" on decisionmaking and trusting teachers to make the right decisions.

ONTHEWEB

Is Your School Practicing "Collaboration Lite"?
"Leaders determined to impact student achievement must not settle for congeniality, coordination, delegating responsibilities, or any form of 'collaboration lite'," writes learning community expert Rick Dufour. Instead, leaders must *expect* collaboration and define it in narrow terms. (*Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2003)

http://tinyurl.com/3xx6c

PRINCIPAL NANCY GROGAN remembers when she first drove up to the gates of Wellborn Elementary School. "To be honest, my first thought was 'what in the world are you doing here?' Because I still saw myself as a teacher." She had applied for an assistant principal's position in Calhoun County "for the interviewing experience," with no real expectation that she would land a job. The next day she was asked to report to work as an AP.

That was 11 years ago. After two years in the number-two position, Grogan moved into the principal's office. Veteran teachers who worked with her in those early days say that Grogan has always set high standards for Wellborn's faculty. What's different today is her willingness — even her insistence — that teachers share the leadership for learning in the school.

In years past, says reading coach Jennifer Huckaby, Grogan may have seen herself in the role of sole problem-solver. "We all bring different skills and knowledge to the table," Huckaby says. "But I think she was always expected to bring it all to the table, and she tried to live up to our expectation." Over the last year or two, Huckaby sees a change in Grogan's outlook. "She has begun to say, 'I don't know it all.' I have my support staff and I have 44 master teachers in this school, and between us all we can find the answer. And if we can't, we know where to go to find the answer."

For the 29-year old Huckaby — who is completing her first year in a job that has taken her out of the classroom and into a larger leadership role of her own — the philosophy of shared leadership is familiar and sensible. "The business world is doing it. It's working for churches — pastors are doing it. And when I visit other schools that are successful, I see the same shared leadership that we have here in our school now."

"For an outsider looking in, it may seem like a weakness when a principal turns over some of her power to her staff," Huckaby says. "They might not understand the wisdom in distributing power this way. But this is what effective leaders do today. They know how to distribute leadership and still keep stoking the fires."

On a visit to Wellborn Elementary in the early days of April, we sat down with Nancy Grogan and asked her to talk about her leadership journey. Here is some of what she told us.

How would you describe your leadership style as a principal?

It's evolving. It has been exciting, because what I've learned about leadership even in last several years has helped me learn to release my tight grip on decisionmaking. I know the buck stops right here in the principal's office, but I also know that our teachers now have the training to make good, solid instructional and curriculum decisions. When the buck stops here, it's going to be okay. Because they know what they're doing."

How has your view of leadership changed?

I would say that six or seven years ago, I thought it was all on my shoulders. I thought if I've got the vision, and the vision seems right — if it's focused on our students, if I have high expectations for everyone, including myself, if we use research-based strategies, then we'll be okay.

This is a community school, and I really came here as an outsider. I didn't come up through the teaching ranks here. So coming in, I had some different insights and perceptions of what we needed to be doing. I'd been through the effective schools approach in West Virginia as a

teacher. It made perfect sense to me that everybody would want that. So off you go, full speed ahead, and then all of a sudden you look back and see you've got a few hanging on with you, but you're moving too fast.

I was probably expecting too much, too quick, because we had some serious work to do with our population of students. We are the highest poverty school in Calhoun County. So when the accountability (test scores) first came out, we were struggling. We knew we had students who were not reading on grade level with comprehension. We knew we were sending students on to our feeder schools without as strong a math background as they should have.

I knew we had good teachers here. Everything was in place for this school to succeed. But we had to come to believe *as a school* that we could meet the needs of every child.

When you say you were moving too fast, what does that mean?

I've always told my teachers to keep your eyes on the eyes of your children. They're going to tell you in that classroom if they're getting it or not getting it. And I think I forgot to keep my eyes on my teachers.

I really didn't have the kind of training that helps you learn how to lead a group of adults. I understood child growth and development. I had studied that in college and seen it play out in my classrooms over the years. But when it came to adult growth and learning, I just assumed that everybody was on the same page with me. Not that I was always on the right pages, but I thought everybody was where I was. What I failed to really understand was…that when you begin to implement change, some are ready, some have to have more time.

For some teachers, change is a very frightening thing. For some, change can be misperceived to be a message that "I'm not a good teacher. If I'm going to change now, that must mean that I haven't been teaching well." But we're in a different teaching climate today. Now we have this research that tells us much more about how children learn, and the most effective processes to use in the classroom for them to get it. We haven't always had all of this knowledge and these tools. We have to learn that we can improve what we do without feeling like we've failed in the past.

Might we say the same thing about the principal's job? What we know now about effective leadership requires principals to change the way they lead schools?

Yes. And it's difficult to look back and think you as a principal could have been more effective. I understand now that I have to build leadership teams within my school, so that those leadership teams are taking ownership for their curriculum. I have to put trust in them that they know what to do, that I have provided the training for them. I see myself now as the facilitator. I am the educational leader at this school and I see them as the instructional leaders. I really do.

What has brought you to this way of thinking?

All this has stemmed from the Alabama Reading Initiative, the Alabama Leadership Academy, my involvement with my professional organizations. I network a lot and get resources.

But I think what has really happened, what has really made it possible for me to share leadership at a level I could not have imagined eight or 10 years ago, is the change in our teachers' outlook. And I think that really began to happen during our ARI recertification year. That was kind of a breakthrough time. People came in to see what we were doing, and our teachers began to see themselves as professionals who discussed data and tests and what the purpose of the tests were — and how the data could help us shape our instruction. They began to realize, I think, that we're all on a learning curve. We may be at different places on the curve, but we're all on there.

You make a distinction between "educational leader" and "instructional leader."

When I say that, it kind of goes against the grain of the current (thinking). But educational leadership, to me, means that I am looking at my discipline programs, setting up preventive plans, and creating programs that will build self-esteem. As an educational leader, I am working with and training my school team chairs so that they know their roles and the role of the teams, and then turning instruction over to them. In my educational leadership role, I am guaranteeing that we are following our school improvement plan, that our federal monies are being appropriated correctly — those kinds of things.

My pure instructional leaders are the teachers in this school. When you empower them with enough professional development so that they understand how to, for example, critique a new basal reading series, or analyze a program and determine whether it is truly scientifically based or just a cutesy fluffy thing, then they are ready to lead instruction.

When we do our monthly data meetings, I now have teachers willing to say "this didn't work" with the principal sitting right there in front of them. They've begun to take ownership of the instructional program in our school. So we put our heads together and talk about what the teacher might need from the leadership team that we have not provided.

I'm seeing shared teaching that really started last year, with teachers going in to observe other teachers. That was a huge barrier to break down. They got to choose who they wanted to go observe. We didn't do any forced feeding. And then when we had our monthly grade level meetings, the new excitement was amazing. "I saw this teacher teach for the first time and I've

Continued on page 15.

"This is what effective leaders do today. They know how to distribute leadership and still keep stoking the fires."

“No Excuses” Leadership
Continued from page 4.

instruction. Where does a principal find that time? Lenhart called on his Army experience to solve the problem.

Nixon has the equivalent of two assistant principals — one for administration and one for curriculum. In the Army vernacular, administrative assistant Shanetha Patterson is “the executive officer,” he says. “She’s in charge when I’m not here, and I hold her responsible for the day-to-day running of the school. She handles most of the discipline, prepares all of the routine reports and does a hundred other things that keep a school running.”

Lenhart also receives strong support from Nixon’s office staff who serve as a paperwork clearinghouse, digging through the daily two-foot stack of mail addressed to “Principal” and sending only what’s important to his in-box.

“My assistants work hard because I want to be in the classrooms. I want to be the instructional leader. I want the teachers to know that I know what their job is and that when I walk into their classrooms, I’m not just in there wasting time.”

Principals who adopt this mode of operation need two assets, Lenhart says. They must know good instruction and how teachers manage learning. And they must be willing to admit what they *don’t* know.

“The things you don’t know about, you have to learn about,” he says. “Like kindergarten. I can walk into those classrooms now, and I know what’s supposed to go on. But I had to use my resources here to learn what I needed to know. We have some of the best kindergarten teachers in the city, with some of the highest scores. I went to one of them and said, ‘I need you to teach me,’ and she spent a lot of time doing that.”

Lenhart is also able to draw on the skills of full-time instructional assistant Dionne Woody, who came to the school last summer looking for a teaching job. “She wanted to teach in a Title I school where she could make a real difference. She completely understood what I wanted to do, and when the assistant position opened up, I asked her to take it on.”

Woody chaired the team that wrote the school’s improvement plan and works closely with Lenhart on its implementation. “She does the weekly checks that we do to make sure we’re actually doing everything we said we would. She visits classrooms every day and monitors our lesson plans. One of the things we changed is that every grade level has its own daily planning period, and she goes to those meetings once a week. She does professional development in the areas we’ve identified.” Both Woody and Lenhart like to “grab the chalk and teach,” and if they see a particular problem, “she and I and our reading coach may model lessons and show teachers what we want to see in the classroom.”

In addition to grade level meetings, Lenhart has established cross-grade “curriculum cadres” around the core subjects. The cadres meet monthly “so we can coordinate our curriculum from grade to grade.”

Wrestling with expectations

Like all good principals, Lenhart is always seeking the balance between setting expectations for the faculty and encouraging them to become more self-directed and collaborative.

“I see my job as to take the willing and able teachers and help them find a way to reach the goal of the school,” he says. “You have to assume that because they became teachers, they are committed to having children learn. So if they are able and willing, leadership is more about helping set the vision, delegating, and letting them go.”

When he first arrived, Lenhart says, Nixon’s large population of high-need students and its history of low achievement had fostered a level of complacency about what was possible. Moving from an “excuses” to a “no excuses” mindset became his top priority.

“There was just an embedded belief that these kids were about as good as we’re going to get them — that they couldn’t do more than they were already doing. The first couple of months of school, I may have been the most hated man in Montgomery Public Schools, because I just wasn’t going to accept that philosophy. And I guess, being retired, I could say to myself, ‘Well, if they fire me, I’ll go down doing what I think is right.’”

But as time went on, Lenhart says, “the teachers started accepting that I was going to be in their classrooms, and I was going to talk to them about instruction, and that we could have a conversation about what we needed to do. Not everything I do is directive. Many times I’m describing what I want to get. Then we started having success, and attitudes began to change. They began to see that we can shape this thing, that all [intellectual] development is not natural, that some of it has to be taught using many strategies.”

One focus was the book *No Excuses: 21 Lessons from High Poverty, High Performing Schools*, which includes case studies that show how educators have helped high-needs children make significant gains in achievement. The message: “We’re all professionals. Saying we *can’t* get there is just not an option. So you start trying things and some of them work. That process, I think, is what has really brought this school around.”

Learning lessons of his own

Although central office leaders in Montgomery have described Lenhart as perhaps the best first-year principal in the system, he is quick to say that “I am still evolving. I have a

ONTHEWEB

Identify Your School’s Core Values

The first step toward shared leadership among principals and teachers is to agree on the core values of your school. In “Taking the High Road” (*Principal Leadership*, April 2004), Suzanne Bond offers an “operating principles” strategy that can help schools develop “a shared covenant that clearly articulates the school’s core values and provides a standard by which actions will be judged.”

http://tinyurl.com/3dwt8

clear vision of what I want the school to be, and I'm impatient. But I've come to see that building a team to support that vision is an evolving process."

"I've got to hold myself back a lot, because I want things done now," Lenhart says as he snaps his fingers repeatedly for emphasis. "Fortunately, I have two good assistants who sometimes get me in the office and say 'Back up. You're pushing a little too hard.' And I listen to them."

Although his career as a military leader may not have fully prepared him for school leadership, Lenhart says there are strong parallels between the jobs. They're both about team building.

"People have said I'm a strong principal, and I think I am, but I'm not naïve. If I come in here and I think I can do it all by myself, I'm destined to fail," he says.

"So my focus is on building a strong team here. A team strong enough so that when I go away, there will be enough institutionalized processes that it can survive on its own. I think that's what a great principal does."

Looking into the future

Lenhart says he plans to retire in seven years and wants to see Nixon reach peak performance within three. This summer the entire faculty will participate in a four-day off-campus retreat. "We're going to take all the data with us and look at what we did well and what we didn't do well. Then we're going to develop a five-year plan, which is something this school hasn't had before. They've gone from year to year, with no long-term coordinated effort. We're going to define our vision for the school and get busy making it happen."

Lenhart will also continue to work with his faculty and staff on another major priority — community outreach. During his first year as principal, Lenhart has formed alliances with several local churches and community centers to develop or strengthen after-school programs. "What we've done is say, if you're going to be tutoring our kids, why don't you send your tutors to our school and we'll train you on how to teach reading and give you the materials you need."

Nixon is also networking with parents at unprecedented levels. In partnership with the Alabama Parent Education Center, Lenhart and his staff are establishing an onsite parenting center that will offer parenting support, free access to computers and the Internet, and adult education, including the opportunity to earn a GED or prepare for college entrance exams.

"If this school can become known not just as an elementary school, but a place where community members can come and learn, it will help bring parents into the building and help us create a stronger bond with the community."

Lenhart is also keen on expanding arts education. "Just about every turn-around school in the *No Excuses* book had a strong arts program," he points out. Lenhart was a theatre major in college before switching "to something more serious." He's always been interested in song, music, and acting and regularly incorporated the arts into his own lesson plans. After reading *No Excuses* he realized that "there was a lot of talent in the school that was untapped" and that a strong arts program could build student self-confidence and self-esteem.

Lenhart's outreach efforts are beginning to bear fruit. "Most of the parents who have come and talked to me say they can't believe how different this school feels now than in previous years," he says. "They walk in and it feels good. Those parents are spreading the word in the community that there's a new era at Nixon. In three or four years, I want every parent who drives by the school to say, with pride, that's E.D. Nixon. My kid goes there."

Lenhart says that "teachers are emerging as leaders now at every grade level" in the school. His job, he says, is "to help create the vision, help them believe they can get there, and then let them go." He realizes that "I will have to continue to do the principal's most important job — keeping everyone focused on the goal." But just as his own central office supervisors have helped him find his stride and then backed away, "I have to do that with my teachers. If I keep meddling after they've taken flight, I'll mess them up."

"We're already a good school, and we're going to be a great school."

If you asked Mike Lenhart to name the guiding principles in his life, he'd likely choose three — duty, faith and service. "And I'm serving my country better now than I ever did wearing a uniform," he says.

As we end our conversation, Lenhart's voice rises and becomes more emphatic.

"This is the most important work that a nation can do," he says. "If we don't educate our youth who are coming out of the projects, then the projects will never go away. So that's why I want to be here at Nixon. I volunteered for this. I'm an educator and I want to be in a school with the kids who need us the most, and with teachers who most want to meet those needs." ❖

Peer Coaches Help Principals
Continued from page 7.

serve about 15 schools. "That way you could get into every school every month. If they were progressing in reading, then maybe you'd go in and help them with something else. There are other leadership needs that we could support. But right now, you feel like your time is so precious that you've absolutely got to target all your time on the schools that are still struggling with reading instruction."

In the current situation, Hannah says, "We're trying to practice what we preach and let the data drive what we do in terms of our support to schools."

Lessons learned

What has Julie Hannah learned in her year as a principal coach? Quite a lot, she says.

- School reform works best when the reform is targeted (and literacy is a good target). "The connection with a specific focus is what really makes school reform work, and that's true whether you're working to improve teaching or strengthen leadership. When you have a specific focus, your coaching is embedded — it revolves around a content area. How many times have we read advice like 'Follow the effective schools research.' But until it's embedded in a content area, based on our school's own identified needs, it doesn't work."

- And a corollary: "It's hard for school leaders to sell a change effort for the sake of change. I went through that as a principal. But it's not hard to sell the idea that we need to work on reading because our kids can't read. And then we discover those things that are present when change is successful. We find out that we've got to have a collaborative culture, we've got to have planning, we've got to use data, and so forth. Once the structure and the will for change is in place, then you can tackle other issues in your school."

- Although her background is in elementary, and "I've learned a lot from the secondary school leaders this year," Hannah says the different levels of schooling "are more alike than people think." In any good school, she has found, "The teachers know what they are doing in the classroom, they know the purpose of it, they know their students, they have an ongoing assessment with them, and they know what to do when students haven't mastered something."

- Schools may have a lot of collaboration among teachers and administrators and still not raise student achievement. Expectations are key. "I have been in schools where teachers are collaborating like crazy and digging through elaborate piles of data with the principal. But if, while you're looking through that data, you're spending most of your time making the excuses like 'our kids are poor, their parents are in jail, they don't have the ability,' then you are not going to make a breakthrough. You can read all the books and do all the strategies, but until you genuinely raise your expectations for your students, you will not excel."

- Principals need to hear ideas and advice from individuals whom they see as peers and feel they can trust. "Sometimes we can say things that teachers, reading coaches and others in a school aren't in a position to say. Principals are in a vulnerable situation — both with teachers and with higher-ups. They may be afraid to admit what they don't know, and sometimes they don't know what they don't know. If they are in small school systems, they may have no peers they can talk to. They may not have new thoughts because they don't have anybody to bounce ideas off of."

When her coaching stint ends, Julie Hannah is likely to return to a principal position of her own. What has she learned by standing on "the other side of the principal's desk" that she will carry into her next leadership assignment?

"I was the first one to say that it is very important to get faculty buy-in before you ever embark on any kind of innovation. But what I've seen happen this year is that some of the naysayers, down the road a little bit, will eventually buy in when they see that the innovation is working and that it's helping students.

"So my new thought is this: You're not always going to get buy-in on the front end with everybody. But you've got to drag them along because what we are doing is the expectation for our school. Spend a year trying to get buy-in. Chances are, you'll get the support of 80 or 90 percent of your people. But then you just have to push the rest — push them until they see for themselves that there's a better way."

If Hannah accepts a new principal's position, she'd like to be in struggling school where low expectations are blocking the path to success.

"I have a renewed passion because I now know what is possible. I'll no longer have to say that I *believe* we can reach 100 percent of our students. I've seen it happen in the highest poverty school imaginable. I have this personal experience now which gives me a platform to say, 'We don't have any reason to make an excuse. It has happened in these other places, and we can do it, too.'"

As she reflects on her coaching year, Hannah suspects that she has grown as much or more than any of the colleagues she's supported. "It's a shame that every principal can't have the opportunity to be in a situation like this, where you get out and see so many different schools and different leadership styles. It's been a tremendous form of professional development for me. You come away with a much bigger idea of what is possible." ❖

ONTHEWEB

Leadership in Breakthrough High Schools

Breakthrough High Schools, a project of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, reports on schools with high minority and high poverty populations that demonstrate significant student achievement and high graduation/college-admission rates. Find out how they did it at this webpage. One important finding: "The effective principal also shares his or her leadership and empowers others to seek solutions to problems they have identified."

http://www.principals.org/breakthrough/

A Veteran Principal
Continued from page 11.

been on the hall with her for 20 years. She did this, this and this. I didn't know she used those strategies with this particular lesson. I'm going to use it, too."

Our level of professional growth has come through our strong commitment to embedded professional development. And that growth has been THE answer to our improvement.

Are you satisfied with Wellborn's performance today?

Our DIBELS data is so strong this year. Our first grade DIBELS in December surpassed where last year's first graders were at the end of the year. So we have actually bumped up our achievement by a half a year already this year. And that's true in kindergarten too.

So we know that what we're doing is working, based on those early indicators. But when it comes to the standardized tests, the question still before us is why do we have an achievement gap? Why is that gap there? And my single focus all this year has been our at-risk children, who are receiving a quality education, equity across the board in technology access, small-group instruction, Title I assistance, strong intervention plans. And yet, when we go to a standardized test, we have a gap. We have a gap in process.

What is so wonderful about this school today is that we are asking ourselves why. What's going on, what do we need to do? We have an ongoing professional dialogue, and our teachers have accepted ownership for solving our problems.

We've identified the second grade as a kind of black hole for us, where the achievement gap really starts widening for our truly at-risk children. So our school improvement team has had to make a decision on whether to purchase a particular (reading) program that's scripted, just for those 20 children. And it's going to be expensive. But we have nothing in place other than our normal intervention, and it's just not meeting the needs of those children.

When our reading coach explained the scripted program, I wondered what our team would say. Would they all see it the way the 2nd grade saw it and support this investment? They did! They totally understood that an intervention in 2nd grade would benefit every grade up the line.

So that's how our faculty has changed. They knew the budget, they knew places we could find the money. Five or six years ago, they would not have had a clue about that budget. Now they are very knowledgeable, and when they are not, they ask the right questions.

Earlier this school year, you had to have a heart-to-heart talk with your first grade teachers about their data. One of them told us that "When our data showed we were having problems, Ms. Grogan didn't candy-coat it, and it was hard to hear. But we needed to hear it." Tell us more about that.

When the first DIBELS data came out, it didn't look that good in first grade. And I had to go in there behind closed doors and say some things. I love these teachers and we've been together a long time, but I had to say some tough things. They cried, and I cried. They came back to me the next day and said, "You hurt our feelings." And I said, "I know. But we need to look at this data together and find out what's going on. I'd rather hurt your feelings now than have somebody from the outside come in. Because these are problems we can solve ourselves." And the next day they came back and said "You're right." And they caught on fire. And now they are surpassing (everyone else in the county).

So while you share leadership and responsibility for the quality of instruction, you are still the leader of this school.

Somebody has to say, "We're not getting it done." And many times, that's the principal. I have to be the messenger for the data. That can be an unpleasant job, because these teachers are working so hard and long, with big hearts for these children. Ultimately, in the case of the first grade teachers, that was their strength. That care and concern brought them back to focus on what we needed to do to change the results for the better.

I understand now that I have to build leadership teams within my school, so that those leadership teams are taking ownership for their curriculum.

Our teachers are doing a phenomenal job with our children — they really are. Our grade is an A-minus this year on the state report card, when our achievement is compared to others with similar populations. But we've got this gap, and we have to do something about it.

Our teachers are getting increasingly more proficient. But it's a continuous process, and I get impatient. I have to be very careful with that. I want to move everybody quickly — let's get in there and get it done. But then when I go into those classrooms and watch the level of activity and involvement and the interaction between student and student, teacher and student — I see a good quality education.

I do keep up with current research, and I'm going to ask questions. I might throw things out to them to think about. But I learn much more from our teachers than they learn from me, because they're in the trenches every day. They lose sleep over it, and worry constantly about those kids that aren't getting it.

First and foremost, I'm a data person. I do believe the data has been *the* instrument that has kept us from just continuing to feel good about what we were doing. Because this is a wonderful community school, and our kids love being here, and our teachers enjoy teaching here. But it is a high poverty school, and it requires us to be "on" all the time. We can't afford to slip and slid back. ❖

ONTHEWEB School Leadership

See our complete list of leadership resources at: http://www.bestpracticescenter.org/publ/wte4-1-res.html

Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership
A charismatic principal turns around an underperforming school and then sees all her work unravel when she leaves. Teachers watch four principals pass through in six years and conclude that they can easily wait out change agendas. Based on a study eight high schools over three decades of change, authors Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink offer seven principles that together define sustainable leadership. (*Educational Leadership*, April 2004)

http://tinyurl.com/2ozsd

Principal Leadership for School-Community Collaboration.
This case study (2002) by researchers at Johns Hopkins University describes how one urban elementary school in a high-reform district and state has been able to build successful bridges to its community through a commitment to learning and a principal's support and vision. *Teachers College Record*. (May require free registration.)

http://tinyurl.com/2rrys

Virginia's "Turn-Around" Principal Plan
Borrowing a strategy from the corporate world, Virginia plans to form an elite cadre of principals armed with the skills needed to jump-start improvement in low-performing schools.Some experts are skeptical of the "superman" approach, but organizers say that much of what participants learn will help them create structures that last after they depart.

http://tinyurl.com/3ag7h

Cutting-Edge Principal Leadership Development
The Southern Regional Education Board's Leadership Initiative has produced a series of groundbreaking studies and reports on the steps that states must take to redesign principal preparation and professional development. The entire SREB leadership library is available for download at this webpage.

http://www.sreb.org/main/Leadership/pubs/pubsindex.asp

"Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn"
In this seminal report on ways to improve school quality through principal professional development, the National Staff Development Council describes some of the new demands on school leaders and reviews current research to identify what policymakers can do to strengthen the ability of principals and other educators to become instructional leaders.

http://www.nsdc.org/library/leaders/leader_report.cfm

The Role of Teachers as Instructional Leaders
The important report, *Leadership for Student Learning: Redefining the Teacher as Leader* (April 2001) spotlights promising practices that are serving to help redefine the teacher's role in public education and promote teacher leadership that improves teaching and raises student achievement. Prepared by the Institute for Educational Leadership. (PDF File)

http://www.iel.org/programs/21st/reports/teachlearn.pdf

Free Leadership Newsletter
The biweekly e-newsletter *Teacher Leaders eSource* share links to new research, important reports, significant news stories,and other resources that all education leaders can put to use in their daily work, including information on mentoring, cutting-edge staff development, best instructional practices, and more.

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