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RESEARCH

# Briefs

EDUCATION

## Effective Principals: A Necessity for Increasing Academic Achievement

BY

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*An effective principal is not all that is required for an effective school, but it is very difficult to have a good school without a good principal.*

Wallace Foundation<sup>1</sup>

Urban school districts in the United States face a myriad of problems such as overcrowded schools, low academic achievement, and a lack of accountability, as evidenced by recent cheating scandals on the standardized Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Many people believe a new comprehensive strategy for school reform is needed to produce high-performing schools. Despite considerable disagreement about what sort of comprehensive reforms are the right ones, there appears to be a consensus that any effective school with high academic achievement needs an effective principal. Principals, especially in large urban school districts, are faced with the overwhelming task of meeting academic standards put in place by federal mandates, such as No Child Left Behind, as well as state requirements at a time when student bodies are dramatically different than they were thirty or forty years ago. Twenty-first century urban school principals find themselves responsible for educating many children living in unstable homes where poverty, crime, and abuse are rampant. The value of obtaining an education is often secondary because of a child's focus on day-to-day survival.

The purpose of this research brief is to briefly discuss the following:

- Some of the issues urban school district principals face in managing students and employees
- Common traits among effective urban school principals and how some principals are using these traits to meet the expectations of increased academic achievement in their schools
- Some effective principal training models

#### ISSUES IN MANAGING URBAN SCHOOL STUDENTS

Principals have many different students from unique backgrounds who must have the opportunity to receive an equal education. Many urban school principals are simply facing challenges reflecting greater issues existing in the communities and cities where their schools are located. These issues include overcrowding, high mobility, larger numbers of immigrants or English-as-second-language students, increased numbers of impoverished children, lack of parental support, and disruptive home lives. Additionally, many urban school principals simultaneously deal with a lack of basic educational resources, such as desks and school supplies.

### Overcrowding

The school-aged population in the U.S. is currently 55 million. Between 1990 and 2000, the school-aged population increased 14%. More than one-third of schools use portable buildings. Approximately one-fifth use temporary space for instruction, such as gymnasiums.<sup>2</sup>

### Mobility

Rosen<sup>3</sup> found that elementary students who moved frequently were more likely to drop out of high school. Students have more difficulty recovering from multiple moves within a school year; however, students may adjust better to moves not occurring during the school year. High mobility affects not only the student who moves, but the rest of the class as well.

### Immigration

The number of immigrant students has tripled in the last thirty years. In 1970, 6.5% of all school-aged children were immigrants or children of immigrants. Now, approximately one-fifth of school-aged children have at least one foreign-born parent.<sup>4</sup> With high numbers of children of immigrants, the need for teachers who speak their languages and understand their cultures is great. Texas, among many other states, suffers from a critical shortage of these specially trained teachers.<sup>5</sup>

### Poverty

In 2003, 17.6% of children lived in poverty.<sup>6</sup> Inner city children have higher rates of poverty than non-inner city children—17.5% as compared with 9.1%.<sup>7</sup> Though they are poor, hunger can be temporarily overcome by providing food for children at school through free and reduced-price lunches and breakfasts. However, children experience other effects of poverty, such as health issues, lack of clean or decent clothing, and inappropriate housing conditions that may affect their performance in school.

### Parental Involvement

There are many ways parents can be involved with children through activities at home, such

as reading, talking, and helping with homework. Many parents, however, are not involved for a variety of reasons, which may include not having enough time, lack of knowing how to help, or not feeling comfortable with the school. Parents of children in poverty are less likely to help, primarily because daily survival takes precedence.<sup>8</sup>

It is worthwhile to address each of these hurdles in detail because they can all impact student achievement. The primary focus of this research brief, however, is on how some urban school principals are finding creative ways to deal with the special issues facing their schools while increasing academic achievement.

### ISSUES IN EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT: COACHING AND MENTORING

One of the chief dilemmas encountered by principals is locating and retaining qualified teachers. Dove found that more than 20% of new teachers leave the profession within three years.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, 33 to 50% leave within five years.<sup>10</sup> Teachers leave high poverty schools 50% more often than low poverty schools. The main causes for teachers quitting are:

- 1) Discipline problems
- 2) Low pay
- 3) Lack of respect and support
- 4) Long work hours/ too many expectations
- 5) Not prepared enough

The list grows when factoring in troubles of urban settings. Imazeki found that teachers tend to gravitate toward more favorable teaching environments, such as suburbs.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, it is more difficult for urban principals to fill vacancies with the right personnel. Teacher turnover costs school districts an enormous amount of time and money spent hiring and recruiting replacements. It is also costly to individual schools because new teachers, who come and go most often, are inexperienced, resulting in students receiving lower-quality instruction. Low-quality instruction cannot possibly contribute to raising the academic performance of students. In fact, one survey of

620 principals found only a third of them were confident their teachers were “fully capable and well-prepared.”<sup>12</sup>

Principals, thus, have the colossal task of attracting and retaining the finest teachers. While some obstacles associated with teacher attrition may be out of the principal’s control, such as pay set at the district level, some things are within the principal’s reach. As with any profession, there is a better chance of retaining employees if they are supported, valued, and respected. One source stated pay may be secondary to work conditions for teachers.<sup>13</sup>

### Discipline

One way a principal can support an employee is by assisting with discipline issues. Poor student discipline is a major source of frustration for a teacher, particularly a new one. This problem is exacerbated if the teacher has no parental or principal support in dealing with the child’s behavior. For example, if a student is sent to the office for disrupting classroom instruction, the teacher’s authority and professionalism is undermined if the child is not seen in the office by the principal as soon as possible or if the child is returned to the classroom without proper attention given to the matter. Principals must take negative student behavior seriously for three reasons:

- 1) It hinders the learning of the student and others in the classroom.
- 2) It does not create an environment where teachers will want to stay. If the teacher believes he or she will always have to contend with behavior problems alone, he or she may elect not to remain in the position.
- 3) It jeopardizes the safety of other students and teachers.

If either the novice or experienced teacher has difficulty with behavior management, it is the principal’s job to step in and guide by offering suggestions. Often, principals expect new teachers to know what to do right away because they have certification, when in fact, teachers are not always prepared to handle new assignments.

In McEwan’s *Ten traits of highly effective principals*, the author described a situation where a principal refused to allow a disruptive student to come back to his school, going against the central office’s authority. The student had put the lives of about 30 students in danger. This principal realized tolerating inappropriate behavior compromises learning as well as safety for all students.<sup>14</sup>

This translates directly into overall expectations for the school as a whole. The principal must set clear and concise rules for students’ behavior in all areas of the school. The rules must be enforced and adhered to by all. The principal’s presence throughout the day may hinder inappropriate behavior from occurring.

### School Climate

The feeling one gets from entering a school building is known as climate or culture. Climate is a feeling or force present in the air or surroundings, much like the feelings received when interacting with people. This feeling is distinctly different from one school to the next, even when they are only blocks apart. The culture is formed by a combination of factors: the school’s appearance; the interaction of teachers with other teachers, students, and parents; and the appearance of the staff, teachers, and parents.

Although all involved play a role in forming the school’s climate, building a positive one is directed by the principal. For example, if a principal allows teachers to speak rudely to one another or yell at students, then the principal is subliminally giving his or her approval. This negative culture permeates the school, sending the message to parents, students, and teachers that rudeness is tolerated at the school. On the contrary, if the school culture is warm, inviting, and safe, everyone associated with the school will appreciate the school and want to be there. In turn, they will take ownership in the learning environment, and with ownership comes valuing it and feeling proud of it.

McEwan described her own experience in creating a new positive culture and stripping the negative culture in a school where she took over as principal. Some of the changes she made were:

- 1) Visiting the parents and teachers as needed, not by appointment
- 2) Taking down doors to the principal's office that formerly barred entry
- 3) Setting expectations for changed behavior in rude personnel, including a cafeteria supervisor
- 4) Painting dull walls a different color during spring break
- 5) Visiting all classrooms every day

McEwan wrote, "It is not the teachers, or the central office people, or the university people who are really causing schools to be the way they are or changing the way they might be. It is whoever lives in the principal's office."<sup>15</sup>

### TRAITS OF HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALS

As noted, highly effective principals keep teachers because they are supportive to them, assist them, and do their best to make their school's climate positive. There are additional traits that effective principals possess.

#### Principal as Instructional Leader

Perhaps one of the most vital jobs a principal has today as opposed to in the past is that of instructional leader of their school. One local school district seeking an elementary school principal listed instruction as a priority. With the focus on academic achievement, principals need to be on top of the instruction in their schools. This means that in addition to being aware of what teachers are teaching, it is imperative that they are visible in classrooms, ensuring proper instruction takes place.

Effective principals know what students should be learning in each grade level. Instead of simply understanding and implementing instructional programs, effective principals become masters in curriculum and instruction, not waiting for the curriculum specialist or coordinator to make occasional school visits. Principals must be thoroughly knowledgeable about current trends in teaching methods and curriculum. If a teacher is poor at teaching, it is the principal's responsibility to be of some assistance to the teacher.

As noted earlier, teachers are not always adequately prepared for their positions. Additionally, it is very useful if the principal knows the teacher's strengths and weaknesses. Then, she or he can plan the most effective use of instruction. For example, if one teacher is phenomenal at teaching math, but has trouble teaching reading, the principal may utilize that information to get the most out of his or her teaching staff. The principal may elect to have this teacher teach math and someone else teach reading or send the teacher to staff development workshops about teaching methods for reading. Regardless of what the principal decides, it is possible to remedy the situation only if he or she knows about it in the first place.

Staff development should be adequate, and its purpose should be aimed at raising academic achievement. It is advantageous to streamline staff development to meet the unique needs of individual teachers. For example, it is futile for the phenomenal reading teacher to be required to attend numerous hours of staff development in reading. The teacher may further benefit from staff development in a different discipline, multiculturalism, or classroom management. Repeating what the teacher already knows is wasting precious time that could be used for what he or she *does not know*.

Additionally, effective principals set high expectations for students, teachers, and even parents. They believe and expect all students to learn. A study done by three researchers (Wilson, Corbett and Williams, 2000) examined a successful urban middle school within a poor community. The school, comprised of 50% white and 50% African American students, refused to take "no" for an answer. Students did not receive any grade below a "B" because failure was not allowed. Although the school's scores were 2% lower than the state average, they received the second-highest scores for the five schools in their district even though they were the poorest. The school expected all students to achieve, no matter what.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, it is necessary for principals to examine standardized test scores and other evaluative pieces of each student's performance from the current year and previous years and teach teach-



ers how to do the same. Effective principals guide and assist teachers in using the data to maximize learning. Evaluating students' progress is crucial to zeroing in on instruction. Teachers can then focus on objectives needing improvement, not squander time on objectives the student has already mastered. Individualizing instruction is effective because "one size does not fit all."

## Communication

Communication is a vital skill in all relationships, both personal and at work. It is a channel for getting messages across, as well as getting things accomplished. Some interesting facts about communication are:

- 1) Good communication skills are among the most important job requirements that most prospective employers look for in new employees.
- 2) One of the leading causes of divorce is lack of or poor communication.
- 3) People are judged based on their ability to communicate, regardless of social class. Payne noted in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* that all three social classes have a form of communication, known as a "social register."<sup>17</sup>

While these facts may or may not have anything to do with education, they emphasize the importance of communication. Good communication is important for most people, but imperative for principals. Principals communicate with a wide variety of people on a daily basis: teachers, students, parents, cafeteria staff, the public, office personnel, central office, PTA boards, bus drivers, and custodial staff. What is said and how it is said is significant.

Distinguished author Pedro Noguera shared the example of a principal requesting his assistance at her school. Immediately upon arrival, Noguera noted how her communication with others affected their attitudes. The principal scolded a couple of students for being late to school and refused to listen to their excuses. The parent came in just in time to see the principal's interaction with the students. The principal's

tone and facial expression entirely changed when she spoke to the parent about the same situation. The parent's disgust with the principal's two-faced personality was very apparent.<sup>18</sup> It is likely the principal sabotaged all opportunities for a partnership between school and home.

Important aspects of communication are listening behaviors, body language, and tone of voice. Effective communicators listen to the whole story before jumping to conclusions. They give the speaker their undivided attention, and if they are not immediately able to do so, they set up a time when they can meet. They don't interrupt the speaker, and they don't allow interference such as holding conversations with others or responding to ringing telephones and other devices.

Effective communicators are able to disagree politely. Good communication is not about always agreeing, but giving each an opportunity to voice his or her opinion.

The body language we use when communicating shows interest or disinterest in the conversation. If we are looking around while someone is talking, the speaker senses that what he or she has to say means very little. If we continue working, we send the message that we are too busy to listen. If we don't offer meaningful feedback, we give the message that either we weren't listening well or we are unable to help.

Being able to communicate with people who speak different languages poses additional problems in communicating effectively. This barrier can be overcome if a translator is available or if a person is bilingual. In Dallas, the language barrier between Spanish-speaking parents and principals was addressed by a proposal requiring non-bilingual principals to learn the native language of the majority of their school's population, which is Spanish for 43% of children in Dallas. According to a report by Fox News, the purpose of the proposal by the Dallas Board of Trustees was to promote student success by improving communication between the parties.<sup>19</sup>

## School Vision

One trait shared by successful schools is that they each had a school vision, otherwise known as a mission or goal. To attain success and stay focused on priorities, one must set goals.

To illustrate this point, consider how Olympic medalists begin training years before actually trying out for the games. Additionally, football, basketball, and other sports teams set goals of winning games and championships against other teams. Although these examples are clearly not educationally related, they exemplify the importance of having a vision, defining goals, and planning for the obstacles to be overcome in reaching goals. This is a necessity for a school as well. McEwan called the principal exemplifying this trait the “envisioner.”<sup>20</sup>

## Character

The United States’ two most recent presidents have challenged the nation, and especially educators, to teach character to children. President Clinton, in a State of the Union Address, said, “Character education must be taught in our schools. We must teach our children to be good citizens.”<sup>21</sup>

President Bush followed by proclaiming October 19 to October 25, 2003 as National Character Counts Week in Proclamation 7724.<sup>22</sup> He urged everyone, especially those in public service areas such as education, to teach character to the youths of our society. President Bush described character traits such as compassion, kindness, and generosity. He stated that a person of “good character” was a person of “service and citizenship.”

National Character Counts Week was realized again by President Bush October 18 to October 24, 2004, with Proclamation 7834. In this proclamation, he emphasized volunteering as an important character trait.<sup>23</sup>

McEwan describes people of character as those who are trustworthy, have integrity, are respectful, and are generous.<sup>24</sup> Character education is desirable because many children come to school from unstable homes without having

been taught character. These children often observe what role models, or lack thereof, are doing in their households.

All too often, school is the only dependable, secure place children spend time. If a school is full of people who don’t keep their word, are disrespectful, or are not trustworthy, the children may not care to be at school any more than they care to be at home. Therefore, a highly effective principal is a person who has character and teaches character to staff, parents, and students.

## EFFECTIVE PRINCIPAL TRAINING MODELS

This section describes three different models for effective principal training. These models are useful in hiring and retaining the right people who will do what is possible to make schools effective.

### Aspiring Leaders Program

The Aspiring Leaders Program began in 2003 at Georgia State University as an alternative certification program for proven teachers who aspire to become principals. Teachers who participate in this program must already possess master’s degrees, coupled with three years of classroom experience. The program is a one-year internship, with the support of a mentoring principal, often the one who recommended the teacher. This program, like others across the country, is valuable for two reasons:

- 1) Interns receive a hands-on approach with the support of a proven principal. Traditional principal training may not appropriately prepare an individual for the demands 21st century principals face.
- 2) Principals recommend teachers. This may help identify the proper candidates for the job.

### Principal Mentoring

Another model for improving principal efficiency is principal mentoring. Just as the name suggests, a principal is provided a mentor, usually a person in the same field. Malone has shown

that principals have identified key relationships with former administrators as catalysts in helping them in their current positions.<sup>25</sup> Modern day principal training has returned to this model because principals have expressed the desire to learn from their peers, especially those in high-performing schools. Studies indicate that even veteran principals can benefit from having mentors. Mentoring, however, has its drawbacks, such as no guarantee of confidentiality and no formal training. Also, many mentors often have their own demanding jobs to worry about. This may cause assisting others to be a lower priority.

### Principal Coaching

Coaching is similar to mentoring in that principals are supported by someone else. Coaches are generally former principals or superintendents, but they can also be from other fields. As in sports, coaches are those who help bring out one's best. They stand by one's side with the purpose of achieving the goal. Coaching is different from mentoring in that what transpires between the coach and the principal is confidential. Coaches are not evaluators, and the coach's main job is coaching, not taking on another demanding job that will encroach on their time.

Another important aspect of coaching is helping to maintain a healthy balance between work and home. With the demands placed on principals, it is easy to overwork. Overworked principals may accomplish less than principals who get proper rest, nutrition, exercise, and recreation. Principals must help themselves before they can help others.

Different programs specifically designed to train coaches are available. One such program, Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success (CLASS), is based in California. It began as a partnership between the University of California at Santa Cruz and the Association of California School Administrators.

### CONCLUSION

A principal of a successful school has an undeniably strenuous job. There are many hurdles to overcome, especially in urban school districts.

However, great strides can be made by being an instructional leader, creating a great school climate that teachers and students want to be part of, and exhibiting and promoting positive communication. Developing a school mission is necessary to know where the school is headed. Finally, being a person of character is important because parents, students, and others can see what is genuine.

Secretary of Education Rod Paige said, "Principals must be CEO, coach and mayor all rolled into one."<sup>26</sup>

### FOOTNOTES

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