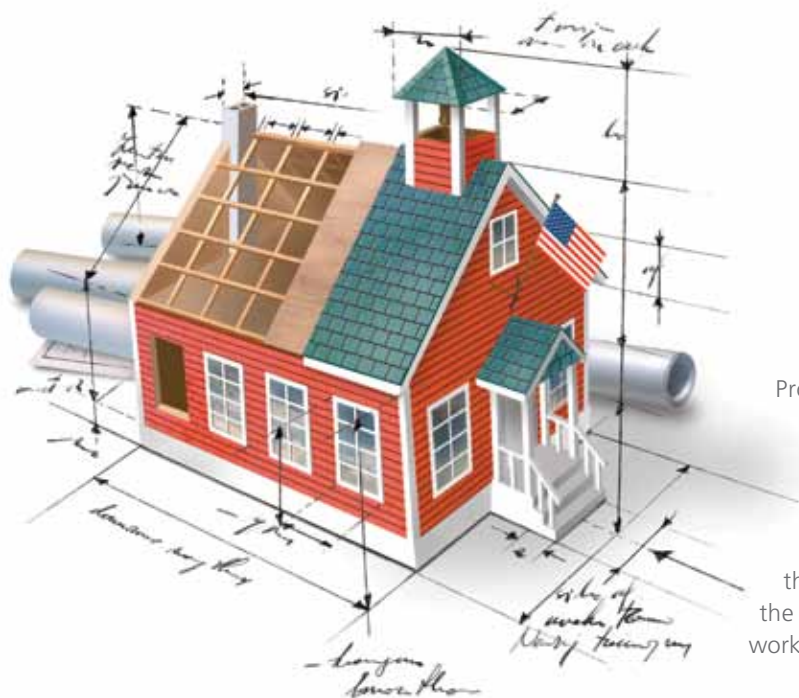


# Leading for Learning



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

*I first began identifying schools with high-achieving children of color and children from low-income families seven years ago, when I began working at The Education Trust.\* My job was to find high-performing and rapidly improving high-poverty and high-minority schools and write about what made them successful.*

*Early on in my quest, I visited a school in Boston where the principal, Mary Russo, had led a lot of improvement, and I remarked to her that many people believe schools can't be expected to overcome the barriers of poverty and racial isolation. "They say this work can't be done," I said. She replied, "It's being done." I spent the next several years writing about her school and more than two dozen others that proved her right, and in her honor I began thinking of them as "It's Being Done" schools.*

*Over the years, I found that although the schools shared many characteristics and core practices, the most important constant among all of them was that they had highly effective principals.*

*But that is too facile a conclusion. If leadership is key to the success of schools, what does that mean? Are highly successful leaders superheroes who drop in to save schools with a series of magic tricks only to disappear later? If so, we have no hope of helping all schools become high performing; we cannot expect an entire profes-*

*sion to be filled with magical superheroes.*

*When I talked with the principals, however, they didn't seem like superheroes. They seemed like—well, principals. Listening to them made running schools seem like more a matter of common sense than derring-do. And yet, judging from their results, what they were doing was clearly quite special.*

*When I was at their schools, I would see teachers laugh at their quirks and argue with them over the best ways to do things. But those same teachers would conspiratorially corner me in hallways to whisper that the success of their school was all due to their principals. They would tell me stories of how their principals helped them through the bad days and challenged them to improve on the good days; how their principals had created the atmosphere and the culture that allowed teachers to do the hard work of teaching and made teachers want to come to work every day. Anyone who has hung around schools knows this is not the way most teachers talk about their principals.*

*Clearly, I needed to write about leadership as a key element of school success, but I struggled with how to do so.*

*It seemed to me that I needed to do something that combined storytelling and systematic research, and so I asked my colleague Christina Theokas, who is the director of research at Ed Trust, to help me tell the stories of these school leaders in a systematic, meth-*

\*To learn about The Education Trust, go to [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org).

*odologically rigorous way. A partnership was born. The result is Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools, the book on which this article is based.*

—KARIN CHENOWETH

BY KARIN CHENOWETH AND CHRISTINA THEOKAS

Does anyone still hold to the notion that our public schools are the crucible of our democracy, ensuring the vast majority of our fellow citizens develop the intellectual wherewithal and integrity to be reliable partners in building a future? Listening to the national debates about school reform and accountability, it is easy to despair that such an idea exists anywhere.

The good news: that idea is out there, kept alive by countless educators who believe it is their job to figure out how to teach all kids.

The *really* good news: some of them have succeeded. Administrators and teachers have done it together by creating a professional, collaborative culture that empowers teachers to do great work.

Take, for example, Molly Bensinger-Lacy, former principal of Graham Road Elementary School in Fairfax, Virginia.<sup>†</sup> Graham Road serves mostly the children of low-income, recent immigrants, and when Bensinger-Lacy arrived in 2004, it was one of the lowest-performing schools in the district. By the time she retired in 2009, almost all students met state standards and many exceeded them, making the school's achievement data look like data from what Bensinger-Lacy calls "country club schools."

Bensinger-Lacy is one of 33 principals we studied to find out how their schools do what many think impossible: educate all kids. Despite the fact that their schools have tremendous challenges (on average, 75 percent of students are from low-income families and 73 percent are children of color), they achieve at levels equal to or even higher than the middle-class schools in their states. We call them "It's Being Done" schools.

Like the other principals in our study, Bensinger-Lacy credits the hard work of the teachers and the staff coming together around a shared goal for the improvement of her school. Teachers at Graham Road, in turn, credit her with helping them become better teachers and creating the kind of school where their hard work pays off.

In far too many schools, the hard work of teachers does not pay off, which is why a couple of the questions we wanted to answer were: What about these leaders guides their schools to success? What beliefs and competencies do they bring to the job, and what actions do they take that help their teachers teach and their students learn?

The answers add up to a rather complicated story, but one we think holds a lot of hope for the field of education.

To begin with, these principals are deeply steeped in the classroom and the world of instruction. Most were teachers for huge

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*Karin Chenoweth is the writer-in-residence at The Education Trust, where Christina Theokas is the director of research. This article is based on their new book, Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools, published by Harvard Education Press in 2011 ([www.hepg.org/hepg/book/147](http://www.hepg.org/hepg/book/147)). Getting It Done builds on two previous books by Chenoweth, "It's Being Done": Academic Success in Unexpected Schools (2007) and How It's Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools (2009), both of which were excerpted in American Educator.*

chunks of their careers (on average, more than 11 years), and many had special training, such as in special education or English for speakers of other languages. Bensinger-Lacy falls into this category, and she said she learned from her teaching experience that her students "were capable of learning anything I was capable of teaching them."

Valarie Lewis, principal of P.S. 124 in Queens, New York, is another example. When she first began as a teacher at the school, she was given an oversized class of children who were behind, including several children with learning disabilities. At the end of that year, several of them were able to transition out of special education services. "Don't tell me what a child can't do," she says.

Like many teachers, some of them got into the work because they themselves had been dismissed as children and wanted to make things better for a new generation.

"I don't want it to be the way it was for me," says Mary Haynes-Smith, principal of Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary School in New Orleans. "I was poor, my mother had 11 children, and the

**These principals are deeply steeped in the classroom and the world of instruction. Most were teachers for huge chunks of their careers.**

teachers told me that I wasn't pretty and wasn't smart. It was horrible." Today, Haynes-Smith and her "team" do everything they can to make sure her school is a haven for their students, who live in a high-poverty, high-crime neighborhood. "We are their mothers, their fathers, their grandparents, their teachers, their cooks, their laundromat—we have to be everything," says Haynes-Smith. Her ultimate goal is for students to have the opportunities that most middle-class students take for granted—to graduate from high school with choices such as college and meaningful work. To reach that goal, the children of Bethune must learn to read well, master a lot of content, and be able to demonstrate their knowledge on tests and elsewhere. To make sure that happens, Haynes-Smith tells her teachers to "teach these children as if they were your own."

She and the other principals know the power teachers wield—and they define themselves primarily as teachers. When they took the job of principal, most simply extended the definition to be "teachers of teachers."

So, for example, this is how Ricci Hall, principal of University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, defines the job:

Being a school leader is complicated. More than being about budgets or bottom lines, more than being about evaluations or meeting attendance, being a school leader is about helping to create powerful learning experiences for your staff and faculty and creating the circumstances where teachers can do the same for their kids.

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<sup>†</sup>Unless otherwise noted, information about the educators and schools was up to date as of the spring of 2012. Since then, staff, programs, student characteristics, achievement levels, etc., may have changed.

This is a far cry from the old model of principal as the person who prevents and manages crises, buffers teachers from parents and school board members, and basically keeps the trains running. It also has little to do with some of the other popular notions of principals, such as the tough baseball-bat-wielding Joe Clark (portrayed in the movie *Lean on Me*) or generic “leaders” brought in from other fields.

It is, in fact, more like the kind of principal teachers want to work for—someone who has walked in their shoes, knows the challenges, and can offer critical feedback and support for improvement.

That does not mean It’s Being Done principals make the job of teacher easy—it will never be easy, particularly in schools where many of the students live in poverty—but they support teachers and help them become proficient in their craft. That helps make success possible.

**None of these principals define a successful student as one who does well on tests but, rather, as someone who applies himself, loves to learn, and is able to stand up for himself.**

So how do they make success possible? Briefly, they:

- set the vision that all students will be successful;
- establish a climate and culture of respect;
- focus their time on instruction;
- manage the building to support instruction; and
- monitor and evaluate continually.

That’s a big job description. Let’s go through the list one by one.

### **They set the vision that all students will be successful**

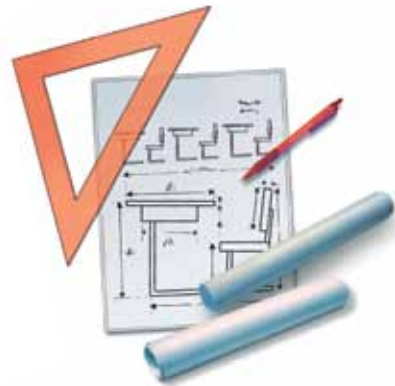
This is one of those things that sounds simple but is actually quite complex. What does it mean, after all, for a student to be successful? These principals have quite a broad definition, using words like “curiosity,” “confidence,” and “a sense of joy in learning.” Elain Thompson, former principal of P.S. 124, says, “Success for me is to see a child grow physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. If I have a child who comes from a shelter, if they can acclimate and can go to their teachers with trust and say, ‘I didn’t have breakfast this morning,’ that confidence will help them become a better student.”

The interesting thing here is that these principals were initially identified because of the high test scores of their students. Site visits later confirmed that the schools were doing much more than simply doing well on tests, but the initial screen was test scores. And yet none of these principals define a successful student as one who does well on tests but, rather, more broadly as someone who applies himself, loves to learn, and is able to stand up for himself.

“You know what a successful student is?” asks Bethune Ele-

mentary School’s Mary Haynes-Smith. “A successful student is one who achieves as much as he is capable of achieving. One who can articulate his feelings, who is not afraid to ask questions, who will challenge you, who will stand up for himself in a positive way.... One who is learning what he is capable of learning—and we know they are all capable of learning.”

These principals are determined that their students—even their most isolated, marginalized students—have opportunities that are available to their more privileged peers, and they know that means a lot more than passing reading and math tests. But they also know students who can’t pass reading and math tests will not have access to most of the world’s opportunities. So they set as a performance standard that every student will meet or exceed state standards, and they expect teachers to have that as their bottom line. Important to these leaders is having a measurable standard against which they can evaluate themselves and teachers can do the same. This



is not for the faint of heart, and it is very different from what most teachers experience and feel comfortable with. It is much easier for teachers to have an individual measuring stick for each student and look for progress over the school year. Understanding state standards and finding ways to teach all children the same material is much more demanding.

The principals do not set that goal out of naiveté. They know that many of their students arrive behind, with limited vocabularies and background knowledge, and have little in the way of family and community support. Sometimes even they quail before the task of ensuring that some students become academically successful. But they also know that to give up on the idea of students mastering state standards is to give up on the idea that they will have opportunities in their future, so they hold fast to the goal—modified only for those very few students with severe cognitive disabilities. “We’re in the rescue business,” is the way Susan Brooks, former principal of Lockhart Junior High School in Lockhart, Texas, puts it. “We rescue a lot of kids.”

### **They establish a climate and culture of respect**

In some ways, this is the toughest job a principal has. Working in schools is difficult; working in high-poverty schools is *very* difficult, and principals have a lot to do with making the climate either hostile or engaging and the culture one of defeatism or can-do resiliency.

A teacher in an It’s Being Done school, Laura Bailey, from Jack Britt High School in Fayetteville, North Carolina, indicated just how integrated culture and climate are with school success when she told us:

[Administrators will] say it's not about them, that "It's not about what I do as a principal; it's about what the teachers do in the classroom." But it all starts with our administration and our principal. They allow us to do our jobs in the classroom. They create the culture. They create the atmosphere of teamwork. If it weren't for that, our school would not be as successful as it is.

But principals can't establish a climate and culture alone. It is something created by all the faculty and staff, and sometimes it requires that teachers be willing to let go of established ways of doing things. That is risky and difficult, but the payoff can be enormous, and it sometimes takes just one teacher to help move the school in this direction.

Core to the culture and climate of these schools is the mission of student success, but at the most basic level, It's Being Done lead-

spectfully to a child. By this she meant not just yelling but also speaking in a sarcastic or demeaning way. Gustafson says some of the teachers bristled; they said they were simply responding to the disrespect shown them by the students. But Gustafson held firm that it is the grownups in a building who establish the climate. "How kids function is an absolute consequence of how adults function," she says.

To help teachers learn how to control their classes without sarcasm and humiliation, she and her assistant principal Jennie Black led book studies, beginning with *Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom*, by Jim Fay and David Funk, which gives concrete ways teachers can handle students' misbehavior respectfully.<sup>1</sup> In other words, instead of just insisting that teachers respect students and punishing their way to the goal, they created a process for the staff to work together to develop

## They respect teachers as professionals and help them hone their craft and their critical eye to see what is working and what is not.



ers begin with a respect for the abilities of their students to succeed, and they work to ensure that respect permeates throughout their buildings. All of these principals know that many of their students are under great stress at home, and they strive to make school a place where students feel comfortable, safe, and welcome.

Deb Gustafson, who became principal of Ware Elementary at Fort Riley in Kansas in 2001, after it was put "on improvement" because of its low performance, began by telling teachers that she would never "write them up" for anything except speaking disre-

new ways to interact with students that were in some ways quite different from what they were used to.

Another principal, Barbara Adderley, former principal of M. Hall Stanton Elementary in North Philadelphia, tackled the culture by "establishing professional learning communities and daily grade-group meetings, ... doing book studies, and changing how we implemented instruction in the classrooms ... [including] meetings to talk about how to support failing children." In other words, she built a new kind of professional culture with systems

and procedures that supported teachers. This, in turn, built a sense of efficacy among the teachers, making them feel they could get all their students to succeed and giving them the knowledge that if their students struggled, they could get help to figure out what to do differently.

This typifies the way It's Being Done leaders demonstrate their respect not only for students but also for the teachers and staff in their building—by building a professional culture focused on the goal of schools: learning. As Conrad Lopes, former principal of Jack Britt High

## School Characteristics

The 33 principals and assistant principals we studied come from 24 schools across the country. The schools, at all grade levels, differ in size and locale. Most are regular neighborhood public schools; one is a charter school. The average free or reduced-price lunch eligibility across these schools is 75 percent, and the average minority student enrollment is 73 percent. All of the schools were, under the leadership of the principal in the study, either high achieving or rapidly improving. Their achievement data put them at least at the level of middle-class schools in their states—in some cases, they are at the top of their states. In the cases of principals who have left, some of the schools have continued improving; others have fallen dramatically.

### Level

- Elementary: 62.5%
- Middle: 12.5%
- High: 12.5%
- Combined: 12.5%

### Locale

- Urban: 54.2%
- Suburban: 20.8%
- Rural: 25.0%

### Composition

- Average school size: 667.1 students
- Average free or reduced-price lunch eligibility: 74.8%
- Average minority student enrollment: 73.0%  
—K.C. and C.T.

SOURCE: AUTHORS' REVIEW OF COMMON CORE OF DATA, 2009–2010. SEE [WWW.NCES.ED.GOV/CCD](http://WWW.NCES.ED.GOV/CCD).

School, says, “It’s about people, not programs, or all schools would be successful.” These leaders don’t come into their schools with a prescribed program and script of interventions; instead, they respect teachers as professionals, and as leaders in their classrooms, and help them hone their craft and their critical eye to see what is working and what is not.

### They focus on instruction

Two or three decades ago, no one really expected principals to lead instruction. The old stereotype was that principals were gym teachers with decent behavior management skills and a flair for administration; they made sure purchase orders went out and students registered for classes. Such principals might have taken an interest in teachers at the time of hiring but usually left teach-

new principal Arelis Diaz first laid out how she expected teachers to work, which included studying assessment data in collaborative meetings. Her first response was that she didn’t think assessments were “developmentally appropriate” for first grade. “I told her that I had had several principals before her and would no doubt have several principals after her, and I wasn’t going to change the way I worked,” Smith says.

Diaz remembers that conversation as well: “She told me it wasn’t developmentally appropriate to look at data. But when I asked her which students were successful and which students were low, and why, and what we could do about it, she couldn’t tell me.”

When Diaz consolidated reading programs in order to send a team of one reading teacher and several trained paraprofessionals

## Good teachers have always built collaborative relationships with peers, but It’s Being Done leaders make this the core of the way their schools work.

ers alone unless kids were disruptive or they got a lot of parent complaints.

It’s Being Done leaders believe it is up to them to solve the essential paradox of instruction: reaching all students is highly dependent on expert teachers, yet no teacher can possibly be expert enough to teach all things to all children. It is only by doing what Richard Elmore of Harvard University has called the “de-privatizing” of teaching that schools can have a hope of helping all children succeed academically. They know that ultimately the work of teaching is too complex to be left to individual teachers in isolated classrooms.

Good teachers have always built collaborative relationships with peers when they have been lucky enough to have cooperative colleagues, but It’s Being Done school leaders do not leave this to the vagaries of personal interest and opportunity. They make this the core of the way their schools work.

Among other things, this means they help teachers learn to work together to unpack standards, map out a scope and sequence of lessons, develop assessments and assignments, study data together, and work together to improve their content knowledge and teaching techniques by observing each other teach, sharing ideas, and learning new things.

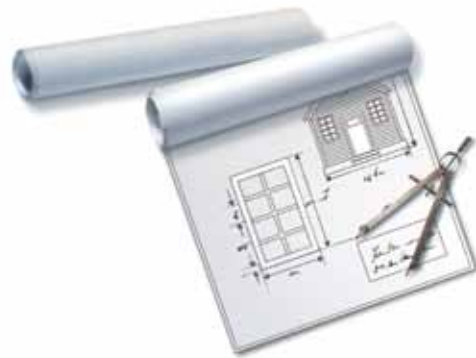
Teachers in It’s Being Done schools credit this process for helping them be better teachers, but not all of them welcomed it at first. Nonsense dressed up in important-sounding jargon so plagues the field of education that skepticism has become a survival tool of competent people. Sometimes that skepticism acts as a barrier to improvement. For example, Deb Smith, a veteran teacher at North Godwin Elementary School just outside of Grand Rapids, Michigan, told us that she was very disconcerted when

into first-grade reading lessons, there was a quick burst of achievement. “Teachers were seeing their kids zoom through these levels that had taken them a whole year to get through,” says Diaz. “Every teacher loves to see students learning—that’s why we go into teaching.”

That early success helped Smith see that Diaz was interested in helping her and her students be successful, and made her more open to give this new way of working a try. Once she saw the value of understanding exactly what students needed to know and tracking their individual progress through data, she became one of the most enthusiastic data trackers in collaboration meetings. She now works with other teachers to get them over the hump of doing something they weren’t necessarily trained for in their teacher preparation programs. The principals may be in charge of establishing how the instructional program operates, but teachers give breath to its success.

There’s more to instructional leadership than setting up collaborative structures, however. Some of the other elements include:

*Hiring carefully:* It’s Being Done leaders take the opportunity to hire new teachers very seriously. They want to ensure that new teachers understand how much work is involved and the emphasis they place on collaboration with colleagues. Most require prospective teachers to teach model lessons, and many include teachers as observers. They often rely on veteran teachers and teacher leaders to help them assess candidates to see if they will fit in with the needs of the existing teaching staff and students. “Teachers ask much harder questions than I do,” said one leader in our study, who requires prospective teachers to incorporate



teachers' critiques of a model lesson by re-teaching it, to see if he or she can work collaboratively.

*Training new teachers:* It's Being Done leaders know that no new teacher can possibly have all the knowledge and skill necessary to manage a classroom, master a curriculum, design lessons, get to know students and colleagues, and incorporate school routines. Each principal handles this issue in a slightly different way, but in general they assign mentors, send in coaches, and work to get new teachers any other necessary support. Under Susan Brooks's leadership, new teachers at Lockhart Junior High School were handed their first year's worth of lesson plans. Only after a year or two were teachers expected to help develop curriculum and lesson plans with their colleagues.

## New teachers were handed their first year's worth of lesson plans. Only after a year or two were teachers expected to help develop lesson plans with their colleagues.

They also use the years until teachers gain tenure as an extended job interview—they want to see that teachers are growing and improving before they are afforded employment protection. “No one drifts into tenure at Elmont,” says John Capozzi, the principal of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Elmont, New York.

*Assigning carefully:* In too many schools, the most vulnerable students—the ones who have experienced the most failure and are most behind—are assigned to the newest teachers. Such students often present the most discipline problems, and veteran teachers often try to avoid them (which is understandable in schools where teachers are not well supported). But that means students who arrive behind often fall further behind. In contrast, It's Being Done principals assign their most skilled teachers to the students who need them most. Wendy Tague, for example, is widely acknowledged to be one of the most accomplished English teachers at Elmont. She teaches incoming students who read two or more grade levels behind. In other schools, such an assignment is considered a punishment; at Elmont, it is considered an honor, and Tague says she is thrilled to be able to introduce literature to previously discouraged students who still need to work on basic decoding skills and fluency.

*Supervising classroom instruction:* It's Being Done leaders consider being in classrooms and collaborative meetings as the core of their work because their primary role is supporting instruction. But they know it is up to the teacher to be the expert in his or her classroom, so they try not to impose their personal preferences. For example, Terri Tomlinson, principal of George Hall Elementary School in Mobile, Alabama, says she prefers a calm, orderly

classroom. However, if teachers are getting good results in a classroom that is more lively and disorganized, she doesn't question it. “It's business, not personal,” is what she says, meaning that results speak for themselves.

On the other hand, as longtime teachers, they are often able to offer a struggling teacher ideas and help. So, for example, when Barbara Adderley noticed a teacher's class took a full 10 minutes to get together materials for a lesson—leading to some boredom-induced mischief—she was able to suggest the teacher organize the materials in bins ahead of time. He later thanked her for the suggestion, saying it not only saved instructional time but helped in classroom management.

Teachers who are struggling are offered help and support, but if they don't take it and continue to have bad results, It's Being



Done principals are unflinching about letting them know they are falling short. “It is a principal's job to make a marginal teacher uncomfortable,” says Jennie Black, one of the assistant principals included in our study. This may sound tough and uncompromising—and it is—but teachers who are doing their best appreciate it. Dannette Collins, a teacher at George Hall Elementary School, says that in other schools in which she has worked, principals would permit some teachers to shirk responsibility; conscientious teachers felt obliged to do not only their own work but the work of their colleagues or risk harm to students. She says she appreciates working somewhere where everyone does their work and the expectations are clear.

Sometimes this uncompromising attitude means that an It's Being Done leader fires a teacher or, more common, helps him or her find a less demanding job.

But It's Being Done leaders do not believe that firing teachers is the way to school improvement. “We can't hire and fire our way out of this,” says Barbara Adderley. Rather, they believe it is the job of school leaders to help current teachers lead instruction in their classrooms.

### **They manage the building to support instruction**

Many principals, when told they need to be the kind of instructional leader outlined above, respond that they don't have that kind of time; they have a building to run. For It's Being Done principals, the opposite is true. “It's not my job to run the building,” says Diane Scricca of her days as principal of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School, a large comprehensive high school

*(Continued on page 32)*

# Want to Improve Teaching?

Create Collaborative, Supportive Schools

BY ELAINE ALLENSWORTH

Imagine trying to be an effective teacher at a school where the average student misses two months of class time out of nine months of the school year—a common situation in urban high schools. Further, imagine that your fellow teachers and school leaders refuse to work together to prevent students from skipping class or support struggling students in a coordinated way. You may stay, but probably not for long, and not if you have other options. Teachers tend to leave schools where they feel ineffective. At the same time, it's harder to be effective in schools with the lowest levels of student performance, schools that are most in need of effective teaching.

There is a pressing need to improve the quality of instruction in urban schools to reduce long-standing inequities in educational performance by race and economic status. The current policy context acknowledges the importance of teaching quality for student achievement, but the most popular policy strategies for improving teaching focus on individual teachers, using incentives to attract and reward strong teachers, and developing methods to identify and remove those who are weak. The work my colleagues and I have done at the Consortium on Chicago School Research shows that the context in which teachers work sets the stage for them to be effective and want to stay in their school. It does little good to put highly qualified teachers in a weak school if they are unlikely to stay there, or if they are not able to put their skills to good use because of larger problems in that school environment. There is a role for examining individual teachers' performance, and for using performance management to build the professional

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*Elaine Allensworth is the interim executive director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, where she previously was the senior director and chief research officer. Currently, she is working on several studies of high school curriculum; she was once a high school Spanish and science teacher. This article is adapted, with permission, from "Teacher Performance in the Context of Truly Disadvantaged Schools in Chicago" by Elaine Allensworth, which appeared in the Fall 2011 issue of Voices in Urban Education ([www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE)), published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.*

capacity of a school, but it is unlikely to be effective if it narrowly focuses on individual teachers. Without broader work on the school as an organization, schools serving the most disadvantaged students will face high rates of teacher turnover and little chance of sustained instructional improvement.

In our study on teacher mobility in

climate at the school. Teachers are more likely to stay at schools where students feel safe, and where students report that their classroom peers engage in appropriate academic behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Research outside of Chicago has likewise found that working conditions seem to affect whether teachers remain teaching in their school. For example,

## Schools that show the largest improvements are those where teachers work collectively on improving instruction, and where school leadership is inclusive and focused on instruction.

Chicago, *The Schools Teachers Leave*,<sup>1</sup> we found that the quality of the work environment was strongly predictive of whether teachers remained in their schools. One key element in teacher retention is teachers' perceptions of their colleagues as collaborators. Teachers are more likely to stay in a school if they see themselves as part of a team that is working together toward making their school better, supported by school leadership. Teachers are also more likely to stay in schools where they feel they have influence over their work environment and they trust their principal as an instructional leader.

These are the same elements of schools that are most predictive of improvements in student learning; schools that show the largest improvements in student learning over time are those where teachers work collectively on improving instruction, and where school leadership is inclusive and focused on instruction.<sup>2</sup>

Two further working conditions account for most of the differences in teacher mobility rates by school racial composition. One is teachers' relationships with parents. Especially in elementary schools, teachers are more likely to stay in schools where they feel that parents support their work as partners in educating students. The other, which is particularly critical in high schools, is the learning

Susan Moore Johnson, the lead researcher on the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, found that novice teachers are more likely to stay in their schools when they are engaged in a collaborative way with more experienced colleagues.<sup>4</sup> And a 2008–2009 follow-up study to the U.S. Department of Education's Schools and Staffing Survey found that teachers who changed schools tended to report better working conditions in their new school than their old school: more support from administrators, more opportunities for working with colleagues, better availability of resources and materials, and more influence over workplace policies and practices.<sup>5</sup> Other studies have found that strong principal leadership reduced turnover.<sup>6</sup>

### School and Classroom Context

In 2010, my colleagues and I documented the findings from a large study in Chicago that examined the ways in which school practices and school and community conditions promote or inhibit improvements in mathematics and reading.<sup>7</sup> We found that schools that are effective in improving student learning tend to have strong organizational structures across five areas: leadership, professional capacity, partnerships with parents and community, learning climate, and instruction. When examining professional capacity in the

school, we found that the individual qualifications of teachers were not nearly as important as the ways in which teachers worked together. When tied to strong instructional practices, the extent to which teachers took collective responsibility for the school and formed a professional community were the most important elements for increasing learning gains. Schools with strong collaboration were more effective as a whole than schools with strong individuals but little collaboration.

While a strong professional community



seemed to lead teachers to be more effective than they would be on their own, a poor learning climate limited the effectiveness of even the most qualified teachers. Another study in Chicago found that the association between teacher qualifications and learning gains depended completely on the school context.<sup>8</sup> This study showed that, in general, learning gains were greater the more that the teaching staff had high levels of human capital—higher ACT scores, more teachers who passed the basic skills test on the first try, and full certification. But there was no association between teacher quality and learning gains at schools with poor learning climates—students at these schools were unlikely to show substantial gains regardless of the quality of the teaching staff.

It is difficult to enact high-quality instruction in a disorderly, unsafe environment. But developing a safe, orderly climate is more challenging when a school serves disadvantaged student populations. At the same time, our research shows that schools serving highly disadvantaged students that do manage to develop strong organizational supports for teaching are just as likely to show learning

improvements and to hold on to their teaching staff as are schools serving more advantaged student populations.<sup>9</sup>

### The Focus on Individual Teachers

Strategies around teaching that focus on the qualities and performance of individual teachers assume that instructional quality is inherent in the teacher. If teachers were working in the same context, this *might* be true, but teachers face very different working conditions in different schools. Teacher evaluation systems that judge teachers without regard to context can further disincentivize teaching in the hardest environments.

Some value-added models consider peer effects or student composition. However, many do not. They often compare students with similar prior performance to each other—this shows which schools and teachers produce the highest learning gains. But they do not adjust for the fact that it is harder to create a strong environment in some contexts than in others. Teacher evaluations based on observations are not any more fair for teachers in the most difficult contexts—commonly used protocols make no adjustments for the types of students being served. Yet, we know that instructional quality is determined not only by the skills teachers bring to the classroom, but by the interaction of those skills with the students being served and the larger school context.<sup>10</sup> If we base incentives and employment decisions entirely on performance, without regard to context, we risk increasing turnover rates in schools that already have little stability. At the same time, it is not fair to students to lower expectations for instructional quality, especially for those with low levels of achievement who most need high-quality instruction. Data on classroom instruction and student performance can be used to drive conversations about practice to structure professional development and build a professional community in the school, focused on the instruction and learning that is occurring in the building.

It seems unlikely that much will be gained from better methods of identifying teacher performance in schools with weak organizational supports. That is why it is so critical to have systems that support teachers around instruction: collaboration can provide insight into methods for better practice. If a teacher is in a school with a poor climate for instruction where

she feels she cannot be effective, pointing out that she is ineffective may do little except make her more frustrated. Strategies that focus on individual teachers can only go so far by themselves.

More critical than identifying those few especially effective or ineffective teachers is to develop collaborative relationships among teachers, school leaders, and families. Without improving the school context so that it is a good working environment, teachers who could have been effective are likely to leave. Many schools are stuck in a cycle of teacher loss that is hard to break—teachers leave because of poor school climate and low achievement, but these are hard to improve when there is constant turnover. Unless this cycle is broken, students who have historically underperformed will continue to do so. Schools that struggle with low achievement, especially those serving the most impoverished communities, face extraordinary challenges in developing strong organizations that can maintain a strong teaching staff. But building those organizational supports is what is needed to provide a high-quality instructional environment for all students and improve equity in educational outcomes. □

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(Continued from page 29)

with almost 2,000 students. “It’s everyone’s job.”

In these schools, everyone has a job and the authority to make decisions appropriate to their role. For that reason, It’s Being Done principals take hiring support staff as seriously as hiring teaching staff. “Most principals don’t understand that the support staff can be your undertakers,” said Terri Tomlinson, principal of George Hall Elementary. “They can bury you.” They can also help you be successful, and the principals expect all staff members not only to be part of creating a culture and climate of excellence but also to take on significant day-to-day problem-solving responsibilities key to running the building.

For this reason, these principals all build leadership teams with direct responsibility for such things as school routines and disci-

they focus on identifying the instructional needs of individual students and the professional development needs of teachers. They are in classrooms making sure teachers are able to establish respectful classroom routines and give their students high-level instruction. They are in alignment meetings making sure teachers have an aligned curriculum across the grades. They are planning powerful professional development opportunities for staff members who need help, and they are continually reflecting on their own practice for flaws and weaknesses. George Hall Elementary’s Terri Tomlinson, for example, has a daily practice of thinking about what went well during the day and what she could have handled better.

They are, in other words, holding everyone accountable for their jobs and helping those who need help to improve. But, more

**There is only one way to get it all done: develop the leadership capacity of every adult in the building and empower all to make decisions appropriate to their jobs.**



pline policies, and work to include any teacher or staff member who is willing to take on additional leadership responsibilities.

It’s Being Done principals also continue to keep student achievement at the heart of their management chores. So, for example, when they build master schedules, they do so in a way that ensures instruction is uninterrupted and teachers have time during the school day to collaborate. They are on a constant watch for time wasting, which is not a trivial issue: in typical elementary schools, 17 percent of *instructional* time is spent on management of time and materials, and a majority of time is spent on low-level, basic material, often filling in worksheets.<sup>2</sup> These principals are determined to ensure that cannot be said about their schools. “No one has the right to waste a day in the life of a child,” is the way Valarie Lewis of P.S. 124 puts it.

They feel equally strongly about staff time not being wasted. Therefore, they work to ensure collaboration meetings are well organized, focused, and agenda-driven, and contain specific expectations. Most of them have had the experience of sitting in meetings listening to someone read a memo, and they don’t want that to be the case in any meeting in their schools.

### **They monitor and evaluate continually**

It’s all very well to have a vision and set up systems, but that is no guarantee of success or excellence. Teachers around the country tell sad tales of all the highfalutin plans by principals that never really got off the ground because no one followed through. That’s why much of the daily work of It’s Being Done principals has to do with what Valarie Lewis says is the need to “inspect what you expect.” It’s Being Done leaders are in data meetings making sure

than that, they are helping all their staff members develop an evaluative sense about their work. John Hattie’s master work, *Visible Learning*,<sup>3</sup> demonstrates that almost anything teachers do instructionally will help move the needle on student achievement; the trick is to make sure they are doing the things that are most effective, and these principals work to help teachers make sophisticated judgments about this.

So, for example, when the teachers at George Hall realized how far behind their students were and how lacking in vocabulary and background knowledge, they began lobbying to take field trips. As one teacher said, “They live 10 minutes from the bayou, and they’ve never seen a boat.” Teachers wanted to broaden students’ experiences in a way that would help them expand their vocabularies and background knowledge.

Initially, principal Terri Tomlinson was wary. She knew how time- and resource-consuming field trips can be, often with little payoff in learning. She required that teachers plan the trips, identify what vocabulary and knowledge would be mastered, and describe what projects, such as essays, would follow. She helped teachers evaluate how the first trips went and whether they led to the kinds of learning gains they had expected. If they hadn’t been successful, it wouldn’t have been cause for recrimination but for rethinking. It turned out they were successful; today every grade level takes a carefully planned field trip most months in the school year.

One final point to make here is that these are not complacent schools resting on their laurels. Natalie Elder, former principal of Hardy Elementary School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, says, “Goals constantly change as you look at data. Once you’ve met a goal, you have to institutionalize it and then set new goals. That’s when

you know you're actually growing." Monitoring and evaluation are not intended to be punitive, but rather to provide feedback as part of continual improvement. These schools are not perfect; they have flaws and weaknesses. But they know what they are, and they are always trying to improve.

**A**s defined above, this is a huge job, bigger than any one person can handle. So the question is: How do these principals handle it?

They say there is only one way to get it all done: by developing the leadership capacity of every adult in the building, and empowering teachers and staff members to make the decisions appropriate to their jobs. Although the change for staff can be intimidating, these changes make these schools places where teachers want to teach. The job is not easier, but it is more satisfying and professionally challenging, in part because problems are tackled in a community of professionals.

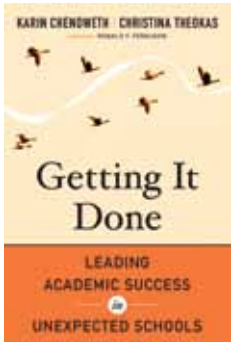
When the creative energy of teachers and other staff members is trained on solving problems—not only individual child and classroom problems but school-wide problems—all jobs, including the school leaders', are made doable. More important, schools that operate in these ways are able to help all their students learn at high levels.

Given all this, many teachers question what they can do when their principal does not support instruction with a clear vision, transparent standards, and respect for all students and staff. This is a difficult situation to be in, but we think there are a couple of possibilities. The first is that teachers in general must expand their expectations of

school leaders. Too many teachers seem to express satisfaction with their principals as long as discipline is under control and field trip schedules don't get messed up. Teachers need to understand that principals should be partners, guides, and spurs to improvement. Second, teachers can begin taking the kinds of steps to improve instruction that these leaders take. At Ware Elementary, principal Deb Gustafson was able to build on the work done by some teachers the year before she arrived, when the fourth-grade team had begun to collaborate on standards, curriculum, lessons, assessments, and studying data. That was the only grade that had improved in student achievement that year, and she was able to use their small success to help the other teachers see what was possible.

So teachers can begin the process on their own. There is no

**When the creative energy of teachers and staff is trained on solving school-wide problems, all jobs, including the school leaders', are made doable.**

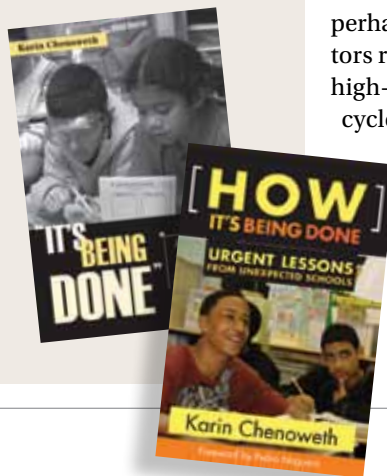


*Getting It Done* builds on two previous books by Karin Chenoweth about high-performing schools with significant populations of children of color and children of poverty:

- *"It's Being Done": Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* ([www.hepg.org/hep/Book/65](http://www.hepg.org/hep/Book/65)), which profiled 15 schools, as well as one consortium of

schools, and identified 25 characteristics they share. To read an excerpt from *"It's Being Done"* in the Summer 2007 issue of *American Educator*, go to [www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/summer2007/chenoweth1.cfm](http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/summer2007/chenoweth1.cfm).

- *How It's Being Done: Urgent Lessons from Unexpected Schools* ([www.hepg.org/hep/book/102](http://www.hepg.org/hep/book/102)), which profiled eight high-performing schools and identified five core practices of these schools. To read an excerpt from *How It's Being Done* in the Fall 2009 issue of *American Educator*, go to [www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2009/chenoweth.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2009/chenoweth.pdf).



question, however, that it is by far the more difficult path. We need more school leaders who understand the ways to build a respectful, professional environment in which all students are helped to succeed. And there is no reason we shouldn't have them, because nothing *It's Being Done* leaders do is revolutionary or new. All of their practices are rooted in the best research and professional tools of school leadership.

What they have managed to do, however, is put together everything called for in the research in a way that makes sense and that is tailored for their individual schools. In doing so, they give us the confidence to say that the work of educating all children can be done. To quote Molly Bensinger-Lacy one last time: "The students living in poverty whom I have served in multiple schools in three states lack all kinds of resources.... And yet there is a place of incredible possibilities within the neighborhoods of these so-called 'disadvantaged' children—their free public schools. And inside those schools, there are educators (us) who have the power and the privilege to develop in our children perhaps the most powerful resource of all—the mind. We educators really do have the knowledge to provide all children with a high-quality education—an education that will help break the cycle of poverty and despair. To do anything else but act on this knowledge is unacceptable." □

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