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JOURNALISTIC ACCOUNTS
**Improving Leadership
for Learning:
Stories from the Field**

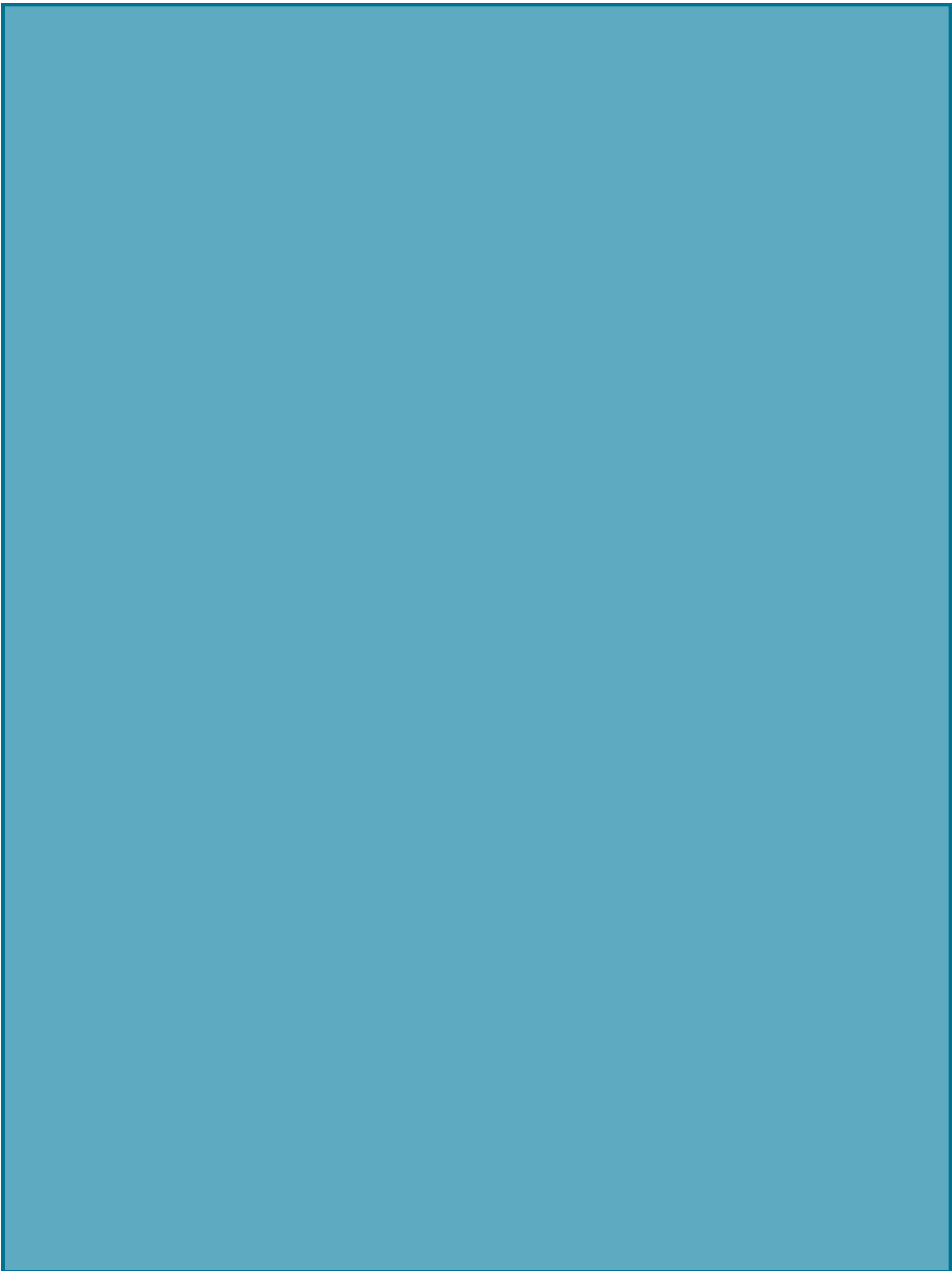
Dale Mezzacappa
Holly Holland
Liz Willen
Richard Lee Colvin
Ron Feemster

May 2008



ctp

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



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Introduction

A different vantage point on persistent questions

The goal of improving learning opportunities for all students is both daunting and imperative. Guiding and supporting what happens in classrooms for such a goal takes place in complex schools, districts, and policy contexts. Given this challenge, leaders, policymakers, and interested constituents can benefit from a variety of vantage points on the work of leading schools for high-quality teaching and learning.

This set of journalistic accounts was created for this purpose — to provide a different perspective on an array of interesting and promising practices that are taking place around the country. Alongside more traditional research and evaluation reports, these journalistic accounts add a degree of “texture” and “reality” to some of the critical issues facing educational leaders.

What are some of the challenges and responses represented in these accounts?

- *How do school districts get the right leaders with the right set of leadership expertise for the work of urban schools?* In an account from Atlanta by Dale Mezzacappa, we see how a district-based leadership development program equips principals with new sets of expertise to lead the instructional work of the school, not just manage the building. The account also illustrates how three urban systems are expanding instructional leadership to include a number of teacher leaders who play increasingly important roles.
- A perennial question posed by school leaders is *how do I tame the endless managerial demands so that I can get to the classrooms?* Holly Holland explores what happens when a “school administration manager” is added to a Kentucky school to free up the principal’s time and help redirect his or her energy, and how district support can help principals learn new ways to be instructional leaders in their schools.
- New leadership expertise and the time to get into classrooms are only part of the answer. An account by Liz Willen looks at Delaware’s leadership assessment system and asks: *How can a state performance appraisal system connect expectations, feedback, and development for high-quality leaders?* Willen illustrates the growing pains and opportunities that arise from aligning leadership standards, preparation, evaluation, and support throughout a leader’s career.
- *How can data be used to bring learning goals to light as well as prescribe direction?* Two accounts look at this question through local and state lenses. In Richard Colvin’s account, one principal figures out what questions performance data raise about “what’s working and what’s not working.” The presence of richer, more accessible data implies

that new expertise is expected of school leaders to be “data literate.” Ron Feemster’s account helps to show how the state context and programs — in this case, New Mexico — can provide support to schools and districts as they identify learning aims and develop that expertise.

Leadership themes

One advantage of journalistic accounts is that they leave interpretation to the reader. The reader should visualize the context and the way leaders work in those particular schools and districts, and then imagine extensions and applications to other contexts. Several themes, among others, are suggested in these accounts:

- *Building capacity and continuity of leadership.* Growing new leaders both for principal roles and new teacher leadership roles is a different way of thinking about preparation.
- Leaders are *learning to use rich, accessible data and expertise* for the deep challenges of supporting student achievement.
- Leadership is *moving beyond old skill sets*. To lead in the future requires changing mindsets and building practices for more open, accountable, and adaptable schools and systems.
- The central leadership challenge is *ensuring equity and opportunity* to learn for every student in every community.
- One size doesn’t fit all. *Local adaptation* to the needs of a school and school district, as well as state and community expectations, is essential.

Using the accounts

These accounts aren’t intended to be recipes or policy briefs. Instead, the journalists help bring light to what happens within and between schools, districts, and their state contexts. In addition, they show the similarities in goals for leading learning across the country and how some school leaders are trying new ways to meet all students’ needs. In each case, they are leadership stories that hopefully raise as many questions about the reader’s own situation as they do about the places described in these accounts.

Further information on the Leadership Issue Project can be found in these Improving Leadership for Learning state-of-the-field reports:

- *Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support*
- *Data-Informed Leadership in Education*
- *Allocating Resources and Creating Incentives to Improve Teaching and Learning*
- *Redefining Roles, Responsibility, and Authority of School Leaders*
- *Purposes, Uses, and Practices of Leadership Assessment in Education*
- *Redefining and Improving School District Governance*
- *Leadership for Transforming High Schools*

Each report is available for free download at: www.ctpweb.org

This series of reports was developed with support from The Wallace Foundation during the early stages of an initiative that explores central issues in the exercise of educational leadership. The reports synthesize studies, conceptual work, and examples of current and emerging practice and are intended to clarify each leadership issue (data-informed leadership, resource allocation, redefining leadership roles, leadership assessment, improving governance, high school transformation, and a synthesis framework across issues), while assembling what is known from empirical studies. The information in these reports lays the groundwork for further study and practical experimentation by leaders and reformers in states, districts, and schools.

A Better Pipeline to the Principalship

Atlanta builds education leaders from within

By Dale Mezzacappa

Shirlene Carter, principal of Southside High School in Atlanta, was in the hallway when a boy who had been involved in a dispute with another student said something that made her understand how far she had come as a school leader.

“Dr. Carter, you listen to me,” he said. “Nobody else listens to me.”

Earlier in her career, Carter recounted, chances were slim that a student would have said those words about her. That was because, by her own reckoning, she was a top-down, “do-what-I-tell-you” administrator. She thought that she listened to others, but she really did not.

What changed her — her understanding of herself, her approach to her job, and her ability to transform a low-achieving school into a high-achieving one — was an innovative, home-grown leadership training program called the Superintendent’s Academy for Building Leaders in Education, or SABLE.

“I learned I had to build a more human piece into everyday leadership,” said Carter, who was an assistant principal at a middle school when she went through SABLE in 2001–02. “Before SABLE, I would have been a little less tactful.”

She smiled. “I didn’t know I was a certain way,” she said. “The oddest thing is, I’m different now.”

Carter is one of 135 Atlanta educators to go through SABLE, which now is beginning its seventh year. Devised jointly by Atlanta educators, outside consultants, and experts in organizational development, the unique two-year experience is designed to produce principals and other leaders who focus on Atlanta’s overriding goal: improving student achievement.

SABLE does so by helping participants figure out who they are, what they value, how they lead, and what they can do to tailor their gifts to the needs of Atlanta schools. The program encourages reflection, collaboration, problem-solving, and communicating, all qualities that have not always been prized in the traditional “I’m-in-charge” mode of school leadership. Throughout, participants are immersed in educational best practices by working on real school problems — with relentless focus on the specific needs, culture, and reform strategies of Atlanta’s schools.

“SABLE is professional development unlike any I ever had before,” said David White, who was promoted to principal of Rivers Elementary School in Atlanta’s Buckhead neighborhood after participating in SABLE in 2004–05. “I felt valued by the district in ways I hadn’t experienced.”

Dale Mezzacappa covered education for the Philadelphia Inquirer for 20 years and is now a freelance writer.

The team set about designing a selection system and a program that sought out educators committed to Atlanta, willing to take a hard look at themselves, happy to embrace change, and urgent about improving student achievement.

According to Deputy Superintendent Kathy Augustine, Beverly Hall found a veritable leadership crisis when she arrived in Atlanta as superintendent in 1999. Not only were two-thirds of principals eligible to retire within the next five years, but many of them didn't understand how to improve teaching and learning at their schools.

Nor, said Augustine, did most of their available successors. Plenty of district employees held principal certificates, but few met the new superintendent's strict requirements. Typically, they were steeped in a culture of getting ahead by taking the necessary graduate courses, paying their dues, and knowing the right people. Many fit the mold of the ex-coach or physical education teacher, prized for being an authoritarian presence. Most defined success as keeping their school under control, not improving student achievement.

"They couldn't articulate their vision," Augustine said. "As far as understanding what quality teaching and learning looks like and how you organize to promote it, they didn't know."

Hall and Augustine decided that they needed to create their own leadership pipeline. With the help of start-up funds from the Wallace Foundation — \$5 million over five years — they created Project LEAD Atlanta, which included several programs:

- The Aspiring Leaders Program was for promising young educators who still needed principal certification;
- SABLE was designed to mold those who already had credentials into the kind of leaders that Hall and Augustine wanted; and
- The Leadership Engagement Network was to help central office leaders learn how to better support school needs.

To devise the SABLE training, Hall and Augustine brought in several consultants, including Larry Coble of School Leadership Services, a former principal and superintendent in North Carolina. To coordinate leadership training in the district, they hired Sharon Rowell, a non-educator whose background is in journalism and organizational development. Linda Hollomon, who ran a principals' institute in San Antonio, became the executive director of professional development.

The team set about designing a selection system and a program that sought out educators committed to Atlanta, willing to take a hard look at themselves, happy to embrace change,

It is clear that initial preparation for school leadership can never teach aspiring leaders all that they need to know to assume the kind of school leadership role envisioned here (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Especially with regard to the matter of leadership distribution, aspiring and practicing school leaders need varied and powerful opportunities to learn about — and from — their leadership work. This raises questions about which kinds of supports for leaders' learning are likely to have the greatest effect on their conceptions of their role and how to fulfill it. Various ingredients such as principal support networks, coaching systems, peer support networks, and leadership assessment systems are beginning to demonstrate what it would mean to guide the professional learning of practicing school leaders toward new conceptions of the school leaders' role in relation to learning (e.g., Fink & Resnick, 2001; Marzolf, 2006).

— *Redefining Roles, Responsibilities and Authority of School Leaders*. Portin, et al.

and urgent about improving student achievement. The application process was thorough and transparent. Hall and Augustine put out the word to district leaders to recommend promising candidates, but anyone could apply, and they ranged all over the map, from music teachers to assistant principals. It attracted a combination of restless veterans, like Carter, and young up-and-comers, like White.

In the beginning, “nobody knew what it was,” White said. But then some of the early participants “had great things to report back,” he said, and more people applied.

At the same time that SABLE was acquiring prestige among potential applicants, district leaders were clear about their intent: Participation was no guarantee to a promotion.

“It is a professional learning opportunity, not the specific pipeline to a sure shot,” Augustine said. “In the beginning, that was troubling for people to understand, because of what had happened in the past,” when connections meant everything.

A new kind of leadership network

To date, of the 135 participants, 54 have been promoted, 26 of them to principalships and 28 to other critical positions: model teacher leaders, who work with a cluster of schools on teaching and learning; instructional liaison specialists, who are school-based; and other roles, such as program managers, academic deans, and assistant principals.

“We’re preparing people for all kinds of leadership roles,” Rowell said.

So far, 23 SABLE graduates have either left the district — many to assume leadership positions elsewhere — or retired.

But that leaves more than 100 educators in the 93-school district who are now part of a new kind of leadership network, one of like-minded individuals trained to work together in a certain way for school improvement. Newly promoted SABLE principals seek out their SABLE colleagues to join leadership teams in their new schools.

“SABLE represents a culture change,” Rowell said.

For sure, the road to the principal’s job is no longer about who you know.

Applicants are required to write an essay about their core values and assemble a portfolio enumerating efforts they have made to assume leadership roles at their schools — whether, for example, they’ve analyzed test scores, served on a faculty search committee, worked on a school improvement team, or mentored a teacher. Then, they undergo not just an interview, but a process known as the “fishbowl,” in which they participate in a facilitated group discussion while being rated by observers. The raters look not just for depth of the participants’ knowledge, but for the way they interact with others — whether they tend to hog the conversation, serve as a mediator, listen actively, respond to previous points, or support what others say.

While the program has evolved and adapted, the basic structure remains the same. Initially, the participants, between 20 and 30 a year, spend an entire week in training, during which they undergo a series of assessment instruments designed to help them understand themselves. The assessments include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which helps determine introversion or extroversion and other personality traits, and a multi-rater feedback — the so-called 360 in which the person designates others, including a peer, a supervisor, and a subordinate, to rate them in several areas. Those evaluations are compared to the person’s view of himself or herself.

Dissecting strengths and weaknesses

“The beginning parts are very reflective, who you are and why you are the way you are,” White said. “We do personal, leadership, and work inventories, all of that in depth.” With the help of their colleagues, participants dissect their own strengths and weaknesses.

“It made us look at leadership through different frames — the business, human, and political side — and helped us understand the vast responsibilities of being an instructional leader. The bottom line was always improving student achievement.”

None of that, said White and other SABLE alumni, is common practice in university-based courses that lead to principal certification.

“It gave me the opportunity during the first few months to look at my own values and belief system and how they impact my decision-making,” said Clara Taylor, the instructional liaison specialist at Martin Luther King Middle School, who finished two years of SABLE in 2005–06. “SABLE deals with professionalism, but also emotional things that may be barriers to moving on.”

Tresa Riney Andrews, who was promoted after SABLE to be principal of King, said that SABLE also promotes Hall’s vision and priorities.

“There’s a lot of self-discovery during the SABLE program, but it also gives you a better understanding of the superintendent’s expectations of where we’re moving as a district,” Andrews said.

After the first weeklong training, participants meet once a month for two days, on a consecutive Friday and Saturday. Initially, the focus is on creating a collegial, non-threatening atmosphere. In addition to examining their own leadership style, participants learn about shaping a healthy school culture, using time efficiently, building relationships, and cementing trust. In those sessions, called learning modules, they are divided into “table groups” of four or five people who meet throughout the year to hash out problems and work on specific projects.

They are constantly examining their own styles, vision, core values, beliefs, decision-making process, and sense of mission.

“By interacting, you can see how different belief systems can lead you to take a different route,” Taylor said. “I could think about some decisions I made and why I made them.”

The table group, she and others said, becomes a kind of family and counteracts the inclination for educators, principals, and teachers alike to work in isolation from their peers.

At the weekly sessions, participants also learn practical skills, particularly how to use data to drive student achievement, how to recognize effective teaching, how to coach colleagues and subordinates for higher performance, and how to develop professional learning communities within their schools. They study successful school reform models and dissect videos of teachers at work. They do case studies: A school is considered failing, has a majority of students living in poverty, discipline is a problem, and teacher morale is low. What would you do? What are the first steps you would take?

“SABLE reinforced a lot of my ideas and thought patterns, and I was able to add things to my tool box,” said LePaul Shelton, a 35-year-old Morehouse College graduate who was promoted after one year in SABLE to lead the Ed S. Cook Elementary School. “It made us look at leadership through different frames — the business, human, and political side — and helped us understand the vast responsibilities of being an instructional leader. The bottom line was always improving student achievement.”

During that first year, each participant also gets a mentor, which is one of the key facets of the program. The mentor is an experienced principal chosen for his or her experience and success in improving academic achievement and works with two or three SABLE participants at a time.

Shelton was mentored by Marcene Thornton, a motherly former English teacher who has spent 30 years in the system.

“I allowed them to see the full picture of what a school administrator does,” she said. “Some asked me to help them with their [job] interview; some visited my school and did walk-arounds with me.”

Some, like Shelton, consulted her every week.

Year 2: Learning in action

Interspersed during the first year are panels and discussions that bring in a broader view, including a session with a visiting group of principals and superintendents from around the country. Last year, the program inaugurated a panel of Atlanta school leaders, including Augustine, who discussed in depth the district’s reform priorities, which include middle school transformation, small high schools, and single-gender education.

After the first year, some SABLE participants get new jobs immediately — about half of the 54 promoted so far are in that category. Those not immediately promoted participate in a yearlong project called Learning in Action. They are divided into three groups, each studying a different Atlanta middle school.

Again, they meet once a month for two straight days, but this time, each team spends Friday in their school and Saturday debriefing about what they learned. The teams are assembled to assure diversity, and the schools they study are diverse as well: One is high-achieving; one is in the middle; and one is low-achieving. The principals in the schools are all strong leaders — with different styles — and serve as school-site mentors to the participants.

They read Robert Marzano’s *Failure is Not an Option* and *School Leadership that Works*. They shadow the principal and see firsthand how decisions impact students and teachers.

“We have a set of guiding questions, and each week, we have to get answers to those questions,” Clara Taylor said.

At the end of the year, they make a presentation, which the district then uses to drive further reform at the middle schools, which is its next big reform priority.

Whenever they are promoted — after the first year, second year, or subsequently — all SABLE participants get executive coaching to help them with their new job. The coaches are outside leadership consultants, not Atlanta principals, who are available for once-a-month on-site visits and through e-mail and phone calls.

Making sense of what's going on

While the coaches all have some experience in education, “they are people developers,” said Melody Clodfelter, one of the outside consultants who has been with SABLE from the start. “The coaching experience is a confidential relationship. A first-year principal needs to unload and make sense of what’s going on.” The coaches help the new principals, who may seem overwhelmed by identifying the two or three areas in which they need the most help.

“We talk about a problem within school, how they’re addressing it, how the approach is working or not working,” said Clodfelter, who also serves as a coach. “The coaches raise questions to help them think about the next step.”

Eventually, all SABLE alumni who are promoted get coaching, even if it is several years later.

Finally, the SABLE coordinators help participants prepare for job interviews.

Are the SABLE principals succeeding? While there hasn’t been a controlled study, Augustine said that most are fulfilling expectations.

Shelton’s school, with 94 percent of its students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, has met its state and federal achievement goals for the past seven years, four with him as principal.

White’s school, which uses International Baccalaureate, is more middle class and diverse ethnically. It also has continued to increase its academic achievement.

Andrews so far is the only SABLE person promoted to lead a middle school — Martin Luther King. After not making its federal achievement goals for seven years, the school now has done so for two.

As for Carter, Southside High has turned completely around under her leadership. One of the few SABLE graduates so far to lead a high school, Carter entered a place in which the graduation rate was just 40 percent and academics were lackluster. Since she arrived, the school has made its federal achievement goals for four years in a row, and the graduation rate has more than doubled.

But despite the progress, these leaders know that there is much more to be done. Carter, for one, wants to focus even more intently on what happens in the classroom. She plans to meet more regularly with groups of teachers to address issues they face in bringing the quality of instruction to the next level.

“Now,” she said, “I’m concentrating on making sure my teachers continue to get better. I’m going to start to bring together teachers to talk about student work.”

For additional information on SABLE, contact Sharon Rowell, Coordinator, Leadership Development, Atlanta Public Schools, Center for Learning and Leadership, 130 Trinity Ave., Atlanta, GA 30303; 404-802-2367; srowell@atlanta.k12.ga.us.

Out of the Office and into the Classroom

An initiative to help principals focus on instruction

By Holly Holland

In Penny Cecil's first year as principal of Hodgenville Elementary School, management tasks dominated the agenda. School bus problems, testing schedules, personnel changes, discipline issues, building maintenance, phone calls from parents, and endless stacks of paperwork consumed her 12-hour days.

"I was always trying to triage," Cecil said, describing a job that was "driven by interruptions."

The next year, Cecil changed focus. With a trained School Administration Manager (SAM) hired to handle the organizational overflow, the principal achieved her goal of getting into every classroom at least once a week to observe teachers and interact with students. Within a few months, Cecil was spending an average of 70 percent of her time on instruction and learning, up from 40 percent at the start of the term.

She exceeded that pace going into the current school year. By the second week of the new term, Cecil had observed every teacher, knew most of the 589 students by name, and was such a regular presence in classrooms that teachers and students barely noticed when she entered or exited.

"Penny is so much more accessible," said Cherie Altman, who teaches 3rd and 4th graders. "She'll get on the floor with kids. She'll talk to you about what you're doing. She used to be a teacher, and she can share so much with us."

Teresa Fightmaster recalled the day Cecil taught a model lesson on memoir writing to her 3rd and 4th grade students. The principal brought in a suitcase from home and unpacked items that she could use to trigger descriptive details of her life.

"I welcome her into the classroom," Fightmaster said. "I need the feedback, as a new teacher. That way I know what I need to do to be better."

Hodgenville is the hub of LaRue County, KY, an agricultural region an hour south of Louisville and the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. More recently, it also has become part of a rapidly expanding national model for school-level leadership. Designed to free principals from the tasks distracting them from teaching and learning while ensuring the smooth operation of their schools, the SAM initiative offers a way out of the daily time-crunch dilemma. And it calls attention to a commonly acknowledged but rarely resolved obstacle to education reform: Principals can't and shouldn't do it all.

"When you look at all the data out there and all the things we ask principals to do, it's not humanly possible," said Sam Sanders, superintendent of the LaRue County Public Schools. "Student achievement is the focus, but the only way you're going to move student achievement up is if you allow principals to get directly involved in instruction and assessment. Other than that, they'll be putting out fires every day."

Holly Holland, the author or co-author of five books about education reform, is a freelance writer and editor based in Louisville, KY.

"Within a few months, Cecil was spending an average of 70 percent of her time on instruction and learning, up from 40 percent at the start of the term."

Getting principals out of the office and into classrooms is not a new approach, of course. Many school reform efforts in the past two decades have emphasized the importance of redefining the principal's default role as supervisor of “buses, budgets, and butts” to the school's chief executive of learning. What the SAM initiative does is systematize the process by showing principals exactly how they spend their time and how they can use it better. It encourages changes in professional practices driven by coaching and data.

Based on a study conducted in the Jefferson County Public School District in Kentucky, the SAM project includes three key components. The first is hiring a business manager or reallocating the duties of an existing building administrator to focus on school operations. The second is routinely and accurately tracking the principal's time to ensure that she or he does, in turn, emphasize instruction and learning. The third is coaching the principal to become a more effective and reflective leader.

The last aspect may be the most important because if a principal doesn't use the reallocated time well, then the effort will be wasted. An outside coach visits each principal monthly to provide support.

“This is not something you can just do. It's something you practice,” said Mark Shellinger, a former principal and superintendent who serves as the national expansion coordinator for the three-year-old project.

With support from The Wallace Foundation, principals and SAMs in nine states receive extensive professional development and mentoring to help with the transitions. Participating school districts agree to pay for the SAM positions over several years, and the foundation pays for training and data collection.

The statistical review is multi-dimensional. Principals, SAMs, and their mentors analyze both daily and longitudinal patterns to see how the administrators are spending their time and what adjustments they may need to make. As part of the process, trained outside observers spend a full week each year shadowing the principals and coding their work in five-minute increments to develop an accurate portrait of their management and instructional roles. The research shows that most principals initially spend only about 30 percent of their time on activities that are directly related to learning, such as observing and modeling instruction, providing feedback to students and teachers, and discussing curriculum and assessment. The majority of their work involves school operations, everything from cafeteria supervision to playground patrol.

The shift from a focus on individual titular leaders and individual behavior to a focus on the valued ends of the systems that leaders lead has helped to redirect attention from “management” of schools to “leadership” (Murphy, 2002). While management is necessary — what ... administrators do to coordinate activities, take care of the school building, keep track of funds, respond to inquiries, maintain order, and so on — it generally does not take into account what might be needed to guide and improve the school. Such a leadership agenda implies a new set of roles and responsibilities and the attendant authority to diagnose complex modern challenges and doggedly focus the attention of the school and its community on the aim of powerful and equitable learning opportunities.

— *Redefining Roles, Responsibilities and Authority of School Leaders*. Portin, et al.

The ratios usually reverse after just one year in the SAM program. A pilot study in Jefferson County also found that the rate of student achievement gains doubled during the same period.

The SAM's position is vital to the transformation. Most of the participating schools have hired midlevel managers from the business community to fill the roles. At about \$35,000 a year, the SAM's salary is roughly a third of what many principals earn, so the added costs usually are manageable. Some districts have reassigned or split the duties of assistant principals instead of hiring outside people with business backgrounds. Other districts, such as the Linn-Mar Public Schools in Marion, IA, have hired certified teachers with administrative training, seeing the SAM's position as an opportunity to groom future principals.

A SAM handles routine operations

Janelle Steichen, who has experience in both teaching and business, divides her time between an elementary and middle school in the Linn-Mar district. In her new role as a SAM, she schedules the principals' observation and coaching sessions with teachers, supervises all non-instructional staff, coordinates the ordering and distribution of supplies, and serves as the first contact for student discipline and parent communications. Instead of finding the principals behind closed doors in meetings or having phone calls routed to voicemail, staff and parents usually get a quick response from Steichen.

"Our population has been very accepting of this because I'm more accessible," said Steichen, who assumed the position in March 2007.

The principals are still in charge of school management, and Steichen consults with them every day about her activities, but by handling the routine operations of the school, she enables the principals to concentrate on instruction. For example, the middle school principal initially spent only 12 percent of his time meeting with teachers but tripled his contacts after the first three months of participating in the SAM initiative.

"There are a lot of places for him to be in the middle school, and he wasn't getting there before," Steichen said. "The technology, P.E., and health teachers — he didn't have time to get into those classrooms."

After ensuring that principals get out of the office and into classrooms, the next step is improving their interactions with teachers and students. Many principals have limited experience observing and coaching teachers; they are more accustomed to periodic and passive classroom walk-throughs or scheduled evaluations that may determine teachers' tenure but not promote their professional growth.

Steichen recalled that after a presentation about the SAM initiative, several administrators in the audience asked her what participating principals actually do to improve teaching and learning.

"I think it's been so long that the job has been defined as more management than instruction that they've almost forgotten what to do," she said.

A more collegial, supportive role for principals

Through the SAM initiative, principals learn how to deepen their conversations with teachers, shifting from an evaluative role to a collegial and supportive role. Mentors show principals how to motivate people, when to pull back, and how to provide effective feedback. Principals also learn how to grade students' work and conference with them when visiting classrooms. In addition to establishing relationships with students and demonstrating support

for teachers, these activities give principals a broader understanding of instruction and learning within the school.

Another key challenge for principals is learning how to diplomatically deflect distractions. Whether a parent calls about an attendance issue, a custodian reports a water leak, or a teacher wants to update a textbook order, the crush of people requesting attention continually will divert a principal's attention without a planned offensive. Part of the SAM training involves role-playing common scenarios so principals will be prepared to respond differently than in the past.

"We talk about what to do when people catch the principal in the hallway and say they just 'need a minute of your time,' " Mark Shellinger explained. "If it's a management issue, the principal can say, 'you're more important than [a minute]. Please see the SAM if you need to take care of this now or schedule an appointment with my secretary so I can be sure to meet with you later.' "

"Principals, SAMs, and their mentors analyze both daily and longitudinal patterns to see how the administrators are spending their time and what adjustments they may need to make."

Those with reservations about the SAM initiative point to the cost of adding a new position and the demands on time for data collection. Another concern voiced by Joe Burke, the

superintendent of schools in Springfield, MA, is that it still places too much responsibility on the principal for directing school change. Burke said he's concerned about any reform model that doesn't specifically build a base for distributed leadership. No principal has the background to be an effective coach in all content areas, he said, and no school can transform itself without broad support from teachers.

"The SAM's strategy is that the principal has too much to do and they can't be an effective instructional leader, so we'll hire a manager to take all the nitty-gritty from them, and everything will be wonderful," Burke said. "Well, if your teachers are still not engaged in the change process in meaningful ways, it's not going to work that effectively."

Burke said Springfield is pursuing another strategy, which includes identifying and training two new levels of teacher leaders who will coordinate professional development and guide school improvement plans, respectively. To pay for the project and gain approval from the teacher's union, Springfield streamlined its salary schedule to reward teachers who demonstrate success with student achievement instead of providing automatic increases to teachers based on advanced degrees or years of employment.

"I think what we need to do is look at the deeper changes that need to occur in instruction, classroom by classroom," Burke said. "It's my firm belief that if you're going to rely on one leader in the school to do that, you're not going to get the leverage points you really want."

Lois Adams-Rodgers disagrees. A former principal, superintendent, and now the deputy executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, she believes that schools can attain better results by redefining the principal's job. She said many principals participating in the SAM initiative are creating leadership teams that include highly effective teachers who can help coach their colleagues. But unless schools minimize the operational duties expected of a principal, instruction and learning will not become the first priority.

“It’s not an either/or [situation]. It’s what combination does it take to run a successful school,” Adams-Rodgers said. “It means the principal might lead professional development or identify the best teachers to serve as coaches, in addition to teaching.”

In LaRue County, Cecil is working toward such a dual approach — guiding global changes from the top while developing teachers’ talents from the ground up. Because she routinely observes teachers, Cecil can identify common strengths and weaknesses among the faculty and use the information to frame future staff development sessions. For example, she has begun helping teachers identify activities and assessments that ask students to apply, not just recall, what they’ve learned. In addition to targeting such trends and tapping skilled teachers to model more effective practices for their colleagues, Cecil can work individually with teachers to design professional growth plans that address their specific needs and interests.

Cecil also gets to know students well by being in classrooms so often. She asks them probing questions and extends their thinking because she has an intimate knowledge of what they’re studying.

“She knows the kids academically as well as personally,” said Hodgenville teacher Cherie Altman. “She’ll tell me, ‘this was a struggle for this child last year, and you might want to pay attention to that this year.’

“As big a school as this is, our kids are not numbers to her,” Altman said. “At this point in the year, we’re still getting to know them, and she already does.”

Having SAM Tammy Harding on staff makes this intense focus on instruction possible, Cecil said. A former office manager and substitute teacher, Harding delights in handling the duties that used to drive Cecil to distraction. On a recent morning, she eagerly and deftly juggled multiple tasks: creating a diagnostic test schedule for students, distributing paychecks to staff members, intercepting a phone call from a textbook sales representative, and scheduling a fire drill for the following week. In addition, she periodically checked Cecil’s computerized time-tracker to remind the principal of her planned meetings and objectives.

“It still amazes me every day that I’m doing all this and she used to do it all” in addition to her other responsibilities, Harding said. “She’d have to handle it after school and be here until 9 or 10 at night. You don’t realize how much a principal does until you’re right there with them.”

Deftly handling multiple tasks

Daily debriefings ensure that both the principal and the SAM know what the other person is doing and encourage them to delegate duties.

During the first year that LaRue County’s two elementary schools participated in the SAM initiative, Superintendent Sanders received detailed weekly reports that demonstrated how it had improved their efficiency, responsiveness, and job satisfaction. Although comparative student achievement data won’t be available until later this fall, Sanders saw enough evidence to expand the program to the district’s middle school this fall and to the high school next year.

“For us to go out on a limb like this, we’re definitely sold on the value,” he said. “I know I’ve got three happy principals. I think everybody feels good when they think they can be effective.”

Connecting Student Learning to Leadership Performance

Delaware establishes standards and assessments for exemplary leadership

By Liz Willen

Liz Willen is assistant director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Columbia University.

At first, the richly detailed narrative took middle school principal Claude McAllister by surprise. His first performance evaluation under a new assessment system adopted by the state of Delaware contained a wealth of data and a roadmap for improving student performance and closing the achievement gap — unlike anything he had experienced in his 41 years as an educator.

McAllister, 63, came out of retirement as a New Jersey superintendent to become principal of Everett Meredith Middle School, a junior high of 1,150 students in a rapidly growing area of New Castle County where farmland is being paved over for subdivisions and four new schools have opened since 2000.

In all the communities where McAllister had previously worked as an educator, he had never received or given an evaluation beyond a standard, obligatory visit with little discussion of student progress.

“There was no process, no conference, no goals, no feedback and no discussion of performance,” McAllister says, while strolling the orderly corridors of his top-scoring middle school for grades 6 through 8. “As long as the test scores looked like they were sort of going up, I was in the superintendent’s good graces.”

Now that he is in Delaware, McAllister has become accustomed to a far more rigorous evaluation process. The Delaware Performance Appraisal System that McAllister and educators in the Appoquinimink district have taken part in for the past two years clearly defines what is expected of them. Principals are evaluated for their goals, vision and ability to create and reinforce a culture of learning, and some, like McAllister, embrace and welcome the new

evaluation system, which emphasizes student achievement as a measure of effective leadership and combines detailed student performance data with specific suggestions on how educators can improve. Others, however, have resisted having their own ratings linked to the standardized test scores of students in their schools.

Six school districts and three charter schools in Delaware are using the new system, which by next year will be implemented throughout the state and in 17 charter schools, says Robin Taylor, Delaware’s

“It’s all part of a commitment to a comprehensive leadership support system aimed at strengthening the connection between learning and leadership by defining what leaders should know and be able to do — and by giving them the tools and feedback needed to improve and ultimately excel.”

associate secretary of education for assessment and accountability. The evaluations are designed for teachers, principals and administrators alike, and there are even evaluations for specialists such as guidance counselors and school psychologists. Superintendents are evaluated under the system, as well, by school board members who are receiving special training. In every case, the evaluations are aimed at developing clear goals, strategies and targets connecting leadership to actual learning.

Delaware's new leadership assessment is being phased in at a time when educators throughout the United States are moving toward more stringent standards and accountability systems. The state has become a model for innovation by developing a comprehensive and multiple-part system, says Joseph Murphy, a professor and dean at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, and one of the top leadership experts in the United States. Murphy is part of a team of researchers from Vanderbilt and the University of Pennsylvania that is developing an innovative assessment tool, supported by The Wallace Foundation, designed to emphasize learning-centered leadership behaviors.

"If a state is looking for a statewide system, the first place they should look is Delaware," says Murphy, who has consulted widely throughout the state to help revise its assessment system, which he compares to "a chain." "The first link," he says, "is to strengthen leadership, then curriculum, instruction, teaching and learning."

There is far more at work in the evaluation system than test scores. The system itself was developed by Delaware over the past five years with support from The Wallace Foundation as part of the state's commitment to a comprehensive leadership support system aimed at strengthening the connection between learning and leadership. The system does so by defining what school leaders should know and be able to do — and by giving them the tools and feedback they need to improve and ultimately excel.

The new evaluation system comes after the entire state adopted the national "ISLLC" standards for school leaders in 2001, named after the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. As a result, school leaders throughout the state are aware of clear expectations to improve teaching and learning. That means possessing skills, knowledge and values aligned to the state's standards, such as improving mathematical problem solving. A principal, for example, might observe lessons and give feedback on the quality of instruction — or even a model a strategy.

More recently, as notions of school leadership have increasingly emphasized learning and school improvement, ideas about leadership assessment ... have emphasized leaders' performance and results (outcomes), rather than traits and disposition; aimed at ascertaining how well leaders and their performance meet criteria defined by professional bodies and by policy; served formative as well as summative purposes, often aiming at leaders' learning and further development; and assumed that leaders' work was context-dependent and could be best understood in relation to particular kinds of organizational and community contexts.

— Purposes, Uses and Practices of Leadership Assessment in Education. Portin, et al., October 2006.

Revised standards that are coming out in 2008 also will define specific behaviors that exemplify good leadership, such as demonstrating how well leaders know and use the curriculum, along with ways of assessing student progress, says Jackie Wilson, the associate director of Delaware's Academy for School Leadership at the University of Delaware.

To make sure goals are being met throughout the state, staff members and administrators rate themselves and one another with a score of one to four, with four being exemplary. A rating of three means "effective," two means "needs improvement" and one is "unsatisfactory." The process — known as formative assessment — begins in the summer with goal setting.

Midway through the year, the principal meets with an administrator, usually the assistant superintendent or the superintendent of the district. A follow-up conversation takes place with feedback given on how the goals that were set earlier are or are not being met. The principal brings evidence to the meeting of what he or she has done to achieve the goals, which might range from spending more time in classrooms to closing the achievement gap between whites and minorities. The evidence might include a file of e-mails and letters to parents, students and guidance counselors documenting conversations and instructional plans, for example.

After that midyear meeting, a written progress report is drawn up, providing a kind of roadmap of what needs to be done for the rest of the year to meet the goals. At the end of the year, after a third meeting, a summative report is drawn up. Supervisors ultimately rate the principals based on data from three sources: teachers, the principal's self-assessment and the supervisor's own assessment.

Middle school principal McAllister says the new system has changed the way he thinks about his job. "I'm being assessed on student learning, and that's what our business is," he says. "I was a science and math teacher, so I love all this data."

For other principals, the detailed and blunt evaluations can seem harsh. When Lesley Sparks, the former principal of Silver Lake Elementary in Middletown, read the word "unsatisfactory" on one portion of her summative evaluation in August, she felt angry, even though it represented just one part of an overall satisfactory rating that praised many other aspects of her leadership.

"I was disgusted. I wanted to throw it in the garbage," Sparks recalls. "I don't like the fact that everything is based on test scores."

Middletown High School principal Donna Mitchell says she was somewhat relieved when her first "unsatisfactory" rating during the first year of the new evaluation system came with specific tools and ideas on what she could do to improve a gap that had white students outperforming minorities.

The differing reactions of principals in the three distinctly different schools within the Appoquinimink district tells much about what the new evaluation system asks of them, says Wilson, adding that the assessment was never intended to be punitive.

"It creates an opportunity for principals and supervisors to have an ongoing conversation about school improvement," says Wilson, who co-chaired with Murphy a committee that helped write the guidelines.

In some districts, salaries and raises are determined by the evaluation, and a school principal can be fired or placed on probation for poor ratings. However, there are many opportunities to improve first, as all unsatisfactory ratings have to be followed up with an improvement plan, and administrators with unsatisfactory ratings have to be provided with assistance from their district, says Taylor.

And while a district can remove someone based on an evaluation, the goal is to give leaders the resources they need to do a better job from start to finish, with feedback throughout to help them improve.

The entire evaluation system was created with support and input from the Delaware Association for School Administrators, the professional membership organization that represents school administrators in the state, says Wilson, who directed Delaware's accountability system from 2001 to 2003 and now visits districts to monitor almost every aspect of leadership, from mentoring to professional development.

Wilson is a huge fan of the goal setting the system encourages, and principal McAllister has learned through trial and error to fine-tune the process with his staff at Everett Meredith Middle School. Changing the way the staff think about what they do has become a high priority, McAllister says, noting that there was some staff resistance when he first set and announced goals for the school year.

In the past, goal setting for teachers meant reaching more personal milestones, like getting a master's degree or improving an aspect of instruction. "Now, it's all about 'this is the degree to which I want to improve student learning, and here is how it will be measured,'" McAllister says. "The big jump is on the focus on learning, rather than on the delivery of instruction."

During 2005, the first year the new evaluation system was piloted, McAllister received his first formative evaluation, which included a survey that all the staff members he supervises had to fill out, along with a self-assessment. He then sat down with the district's assistant superintendent Marion Proffitt and examined the scores of all students at Everett who scored below a level 2, meaning "unsatisfactory." McAllister met with each student and offered advice on books and reading.

"I said, 'Hey, you didn't read this summer,'" he recalls. "They want to succeed, but they may not know how. I gave them a plan to improve."

McAllister met with their parents as well, and he later asked the guidance staff and district office to follow up with the parents. Faculty meetings included discussions of how to reach the tough kids. McAllister now keeps a folder of all e-mails related to student performance and another folder for everything related to his goals.

One year after the new pilot evaluation system was implemented at Everett and the staff began discussing shared goals, test scores were up 10 percent or more in math, reading and social studies.

"There has been a trickling down, a realization that the school is rated based on student learning," he says. "The pilot [of the assessment] brought everything together toward a focus on instruction. I think it's wonderful."

"We are educational leaders and we should be in the classroom, working with students and teachers to improve student learning. Once you get back into the classroom, you rekindle the passion for why you got into this in the first place."

At Silver Lake, Sparks found the emphasis on goals somewhat onerous. “It bothers me, because I know how hard we all work here,” says Sparks, who is retiring this year after 38 years as an educator. “I feel it’s not just a reflection on me, but on my staff.”

Sparks questions linking any rating in an evaluation to the test scores of students who come to school with many personal challenges. Silver Lake has the highest rate of poverty and the largest minority population in the growing district, she says. “There are lots of things we do that make this school a better place, and I don’t agree that an evaluation should be based on one year of test scores,” she says. “I get kids here who come in at a very low level. There is no choice in the matter now that what we do will be about teaching to the test. And there is nothing I can do but suck it up and focus on those test scores.”

Sparks’ evaluation noted that the writing scores at Silver Lake showed sharp declines in 4th grade. Third grade math scores were down 14.7 percent, and assistant superintendent Proffitt wanted a specific plan in place to address the dip. Sparks was willing to think about the next step, but she disliked the way she was asked to come up with goals. “I was told I had to have seven [goals], plus one on discipline and parent participation,” she says. “It’s hard to work on seven things at one time. One or two would be sufficient.”

Proffitt, who meets with each principal to go over his or her evaluation, is aware that some principals dislike a rating system that emphasizes student achievement and accountability. “It’s not always a comfort zone for principals when you say, ‘Hey, you need to improve,’” she says. “And I say, ‘I’m not helping you grow if I don’t point out where the growth is needed.’”

That is why Proffitt likes the new system so much — she says that by meeting with principals and working closely with them, she can provide the kind of support that Mitchell welcomed at Middletown High.

Mitchell says the new evaluation system forced her staff of 140 to immediately address students at risk and think about how they are taught. Her first evaluation from assistant superintendent Proffitt suggested that she and the entire leadership team should be spending “the majority of time in classrooms,” and Mitchell knew something had to change.

“The administrators were spending 80 percent of their time managing, not educating — and that will not impact student achievement,” says Mitchell, whose office window looks out on one of the many new developments filling the district with more children and pressuring the district to build more schools.

These days, Mitchell is spending far less time in her office, and she believes that as a result, she is far more in touch with instruction. She also has become accustomed to the constant presence of Proffitt, who models what she expects of Mitchell by popping in and out of classes at the sprawling high school of 1,700 students in grades 10–12. Proffitt is at the school so often that students greet her personally, shouting out, “Hey, Dr. P!” when they see her in a hallway or in class.

“The whole focus of our role has moved to where it should be,” says Mitchell, whose rating improved to satisfactory a year after she made the changes Proffitt suggested. “We are educational leaders, and we should be in the classroom, working with students and teachers to improve student learning. Once you get back into the classroom, you rekindle the passion for why you got into this in the first place. The kids are why I’m here, and that is the bottom line.”

Mining for Meaning in Michigan's Data Book

One principal's quest to make the numbers count

By Richard Lee Colvin

Sitting in her cluttered office on a brutally hot July morning in the southwest corner of Michigan, school principal Ericka Harris-Robinson gazes past the full candy dish on her desk at piles of notebooks and reports filled with numbers. The school year's two months off, but she's here to oversee a summer book club and fine-tune her plans for the upcoming year. She can consult the reading test results of the previous year's kindergarteners, think about her students' national standing based on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, or examine their performance on the Benton Harbor district's curriculum. She has other sources of information, too. But the mother lode is the nearly foot-thick report dubbed the "Golden Book," in which she can find out how every student and population group in grades 3 through 6 performed on every question on the state Michigan Education Assessment Program.

"We test kids so much," the veteran principal said in mild exasperation as she scanned the pages of a report. "It would be OK if we could use the data the way we want. But there's so much of it, we end up doing a quick overview and glean what we can."

Don't assume from Harris-Robinson's comment, however, that she's part of the crowd that sees more harm than value in tests. In fact, she prepares aspiring principals to use data well in classes she teaches at a nearby Indiana University branch campus, serves on a statewide team to help principals work with data, and is a member of a national group gathered by The Wallace Foundation to consider how leaders can best use education data to improve student achievement. But neither should you assume that she thinks the mountain of numbers holds within it a neat solution to the messy questions about how to effectively teach the mostly poor students at Boynton Montessori Magnet School, which she leads.

"It makes you ask a lot of questions about what's working and what's not working," she said of data. "It does you no good to just get numbers. Numbers tell you nothing. You need to get information. I'm looking at the data to see what I want to focus on and asking, 'Does the data support what we're doing, or do we need to move in a different direction?'"

Moreover, test results are hardly the only type of data she thinks is valuable. "It only gives you a glimpse," she said. "You need to know if English is the child's first language, whether there are books in the home, the extent to which parents are engaged in the learning process. Sometimes we're asking parents to help with homework, and they can't."

Valuable information also comes from knowing what's going on in classrooms, she said. "How is the class structured; what

Richard Lee Colvin is a veteran journalist who heads the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University.

"It does you no good to just get numbers. Numbers tell you nothing. You need to get information. I'm looking at the data to see what I want to focus on ..."

strategies are being used; is there too much down time; is there too much teacher guidance or not enough?”

Educators always have had data: grades, quizzes, tests, graduation rates, college-going rates, attendance figures. According to a report by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington for The Wallace Foundation, school leaders customarily used data fitfully according to their personal predilection, analyzed it using their “accumulated experience, intuition and political acumen,” and then “chose the wisest course of action.” Today, principals have more data on student achievement than ever before. Digital tools make it possible to organize the data to reveal previously unknown issues. Principals no longer can use data however they wish. Schools and districts are required to provide extensive reports on student performance to the public and to submit improvement plans to local and state education officials.

Harris-Robinson — low-key but purposeful, commanding respect through her mastery of a large body of education research on teaching and her comforting manner — taught at Boynton Montessori in the 1980s. Back then, she said, teachers “gave tests at the end of the year, the scores came back, and you looked at them a little bit and sent them home, and that was the end of it. No one took them out again.” Then she became the math coordinator at another school. In that role, she used test scores to help her identify strengths and weaknesses of the instructional program and the students. She examined student records, talked with teachers, and suggested strategies for improvement. She credits that experience with giving her an appreciation of the uses of good data, as well as practice in using it.

She returned in 1999 as principal to Boynton Montessori, a nondescript brick and glass structure in a semi-rural area on the edge of town. Benton Harbor is on the north side of the St. Joseph River where it empties into Lake Michigan. St. Joseph is on the south side. The population of St. Joseph is 95 percent white, home to professionals and well-paid workers employed by the Benton Harbor headquarters of the giant Whirlpool Corporation. Crossing the bridge from the tidy downtown of St. Joseph into Benton Harbor, one crosses multiple boundaries — of race, class, and education. Benton Harbor is 95 percent black; family income is one-quarter that of St. Joseph; many of its homes and stores are abandoned; and 40 percent of the adults lack a high school diploma.

Forward-thinking educators are beginning to envision a future where in-depth data analysis focused on student learning will be a routine part of teachers’ and administrators’ daily work, and the most important means for continuous professional learning.

The growing attention to questions of what counts as data, the development of sophistication in understanding data, and the increase in technologies for manipulating data open up important possibilities for leaders and the exercise of leadership throughout school, district, and state systems. Coupled with support for continual professional and system-wide learning ... the capacity for educational improvement could increase significantly.

— *Data-Informed Leadership in Education*. Knapp, et al., October 2006.

When Harris-Robinson became principal, test scores were falling. Boynton is a magnet school created in response to a long-running school desegregation lawsuit and had managed to attract a relatively affluent, racially diverse population that drew from nearby communities. “This was a school for elite kids, teachers’ kids, the school board’s kids,” she said. But when the court order that settled the lawsuit was lifted and the district stopped providing free busing, many of those students returned to schools in their neighborhoods. Now, most of her students are African-American, as is she.

Soon after she became principal, Harris-Robinson gave copies of the school’s test scores to teachers and convened strategy sessions.

“There’s always trepidation because people feel like ‘they’re going to use this against me,’ ” she said. But she used the data to begin a conversation with her faculty, not end it. She asked the teachers to come up with an explicit plan to improve, based on the data.

“It’s not OK to just say we’re going to get better,” she said. She also wasn’t interested in singling out anyone for blame. If the 5th grade scores in a subject or skill were low, she wanted the teachers to trace that skill back into the earlier grades to find out where students had gotten off track.

Using data: Just part of how the school operates

“It’s not a private issue,” she said. “Everyone has to buy in and talk about why our kids aren’t meeting this standard and why that’s happening every year. It paints a very clear picture. And if you’re not interested in doing that kind of stuff, then why are you here?”

Working at Boynton is demanding, and she said teachers aren’t “beating down the door” to get jobs there. But, she said, once teachers come, they rarely leave because they feel they can be successful and part of a team pulling together. She said teachers pass the key to the building among themselves so they can get in on weekends to do extra work. Teachers even come in over the summer.

Using data — thinking about it, talking about it, devising instructional strategies based on it — is now just part of how the school operates. Once, Harris-Robinson said, educators wanted their students to start each year with a “clean slate” and didn’t want to know much about their test scores or their families. The teachers, therefore, had to “spend the first month or two finding out who they had in their classrooms.” Now, she can provide teachers with data from the “Golden Book,” as well as other test scores. She and her teachers pore over the data to correlate the students’ performance with Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs), provided by the state. The GLCEs are a detailed curriculum guide, illustrating the material students need to learn to do well on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program.

Eventually, she said, she’d like teachers to be able to tap into data about each student’s health, mobility, and family; trends in their achievement; and so on.

“As a profession, we’re still not doing a good job of knowing our kids when they come into our classrooms,” Harris-Robinson said.

Identifying issues early

She requires teachers to come to her by the end of September each year with a list of students who need extra help with specific issues.

“If we’re noticing in September that a kindergartner is not holding on to beginning sounds or is not able to count to 10 and things are just not coming together, then I want to be talking about that little fella when we still have a chance to make a difference,” she said.

Harris-Robinson, the student’s teacher, and others, including the school’s Title I coordinator, Beverly Taylor, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the students identified as needing extra help. They share their recommendations with his parents and then meet weekly if necessary to discuss the child’s progress. Data informs these discussions.

“All the data in the world won’t make a difference if teachers aren’t motivated to make use of it.”

“I try to be very up on who is successful and who is not successful and what we are doing to assist the student,” she said.

Another way the school uses data is to prepare for what Harris-Robinson called “school improvement readouts.” The “readouts” are meetings attended by a team from

the school, the superintendent, the director of assessment, an assistant superintendent, and outside consultants. The school team presents a report on their progress toward previously set goals and identifies areas in which they need help, such as additional training.

“That’s been a very valuable piece offered to us,” she said.

Over the past several years, the school made its classrooms multi-age so teachers could get to know their students better; departmentalized instruction in math, science, and language arts; purchased several online services where students can go for extra help; and used federal Title I funds to bring in two retired teachers to provide one-on-one assistance — all in response to issues that surfaced in analyzing data.

Using data strategically is hard work and requires time as well as skill and dedication. Harris-Robinson rearranged the weekly schedule of the school so that all of the classroom teachers can meet one afternoon a week to go over data and discuss individual students.

“It’s a constant conversation,” she said. “It’s not like it’s something you can do once and not talk about again.”

These efforts seem to be paying off. More than 90 percent of the 6th graders tested proficient in reading, language arts, and math last year; nearly 80 percent in writing; and 86 percent in social studies. More than 80 percent of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders were proficient in reading, language arts, and math. Math scores were up from the previous year for the 5th grade but were down slightly in the 3rd and 4th grade. The trend in language arts also was mixed, showing a strong increase for the 6th grade and declines in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th. The school’s performance has kept it in demand. Every year, the parents of more than 100 children apply for only 36 spots.

The most recent data has revealed a trouble spot. Only about 45 percent of the 3rd graders and a third of the 4th graders tested proficient in writing. That contributed to the school receiving a “B” for performance last year, down from an “A” the previous year.

That’s why the school’s major focus this year will be on improving writing. In examining the results and talking to teachers, Harris-Robinson and her team realized that most of the writing Boynton students did was narrative. “They were used to writing about ‘My dog ...’ or about ‘My party ...’ But the test involved writing in reaction to a prompt.” That was a skill they were not being taught.

In addition to working hard on their instructional goals, Harris-Robinson and her teachers have to put together lengthy reports. Last year, they had to do two such reports, the first a 96-page document that covered the school’s efforts to teach to standards, a rundown on the school’s curriculum, and how they were working to get parents involved. Teachers worked in teams on different parts of it, and Harris-Robinson pulled it together into one voice. That kept her working some Sunday nights until 1 a.m.

The second report was on how the school spends Title I funds. “We had to review all of the indicators, check where we are, our rationale, and then go sit with the state people and testify,” she said.

“It is excessive,” Harris-Robinson said. “It takes away from what you can do at the school.” She has even taken sick days so she could stay at home and work on reports. “I can’t see bringing in a substitute teacher to have the teachers do it because it takes instructional time away.”

The principal’s role in student success

Still, she sees value in compiling the information, and she said she “tries to make the staff see that this is not just a dog and pony show for the state or the district or whatever. It’s a great opportunity for staff to participate in it, and it provides us with a wealth of information we don’t normally have.”

It’s the role of the principal, in her mind, to provide this leadership. “What is it we want principals to do in order to be part of student success?” she asked. “That’s a question we’ve never asked before. We ask it about teachers but not about principals.”

The work of a successful school principal cannot be defined only by their skillful use of data, of course. That’s why Harris-Robinson visits classrooms frequently. She keeps an open door and a full candy dish, inviting her staff to drop by any time. She makes congratulatory certificates to recognize teachers for good lessons or other accomplishments. She keeps boxes of cards in her office so she can write a note of encouragement, appreciation, or condolence. She bakes bread for the staff and throws pasta parties, for which she does the cooking.

“The teachers are working for low pay, in the heat, without comforts, teaching 20 or 30 kids, some of whose parents are close to being volatile, and so you need something that will encourage you,” she said.

“When you let people know that they are valued, they come back and bring something to the table,” she said.

All the data in the world won’t make a difference if teachers aren’t motivated to make use of it, she said.

Making State Accountability Count

How New Mexico supports principals with data tools

By Ron Feemster

Ron Feemster is a freelance writer who teaches journalism at Brooklyn College. He can be reached at ronfeemster@gmail.com.

Linda Paul, the school district superintendent in Aztec, NM, was unhappy when she received her students' test scores from the Public Education Department in 2005, but not because too few of her students had passed the state's assessment exam. Paul was frustrated, as she had been for several years, because the data were nearly incomprehensible.

New Mexico's standards-based assessment test (NMSBA) determines which schools are making the adequate yearly progress (AYP) required to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Each year, the state raises the percentage of students who must be proficient in math and reading to achieve AYP. Districts that fail to make AYP are designated in need of improvement. If they fail to measure up for several years in a row, schools come under more scrutiny and, eventually, under direct control of the state. The state measures percentage improvement in each subject area separately for eight groups of students: Hispanic, Native American, white, African-American, Asian, English language learners, students with disabilities (including special education students), and low-income students. Elementary schools also can fall short in attendance, and high schools may fail based on graduation rates. The AYP target percentages increase each year until 2013–14, when every student must be proficient.

So for Paul, like all other superintendents, the stakes are high when the state issues test scores. However, all she received from the Public Education Department in Santa Fe was a big box of paper printouts and a CD crammed with raw data. The printouts contained a data line for each of the 3,500 students in her sprawling district among the natural gas fields and Indian reservations on the Colorado border. But she found no summary data for her six schools — no tabulations by grade level, subject matter, sex, or ethnicity. The information she needed to help her principals plan instruction was missing. She was able to open the data CD, but all she saw was a text file full of letters, numbers, and commas — no manual, no “readme” files, not even a slip of paper to suggest what program might help her make sense of it all.

“The data were useless,” Paul remembers. She struggled to understand the legend used to decode scores. The data line for little Jose, a 4th grader, might state that he got a 30 on benchmark one. But it was not obvious what the benchmark measured. Nor could Paul determine if 30 was a high or low score. She was unable to diagnose the problems in her schools.

“We needed to be able to ask questions of the data,” she says. “How are my 4th grade Hispanic students doing in reading? When they have specific problems, what are they? We needed answers to help us plan.”

Happily, help arrived from Santa Fe the same day that box of useless paper printouts landed on Paul's desk. Even as Paul sat poring over the data and sorting students by hand into grade levels and schools, Peter

“What you want to do is make sure that principals, superintendents, and other education leaders can use the data in the warehouse effectively to improve student achievement.”

Winograd, the director of the state's Education Accountability Office, dropped in to discuss a new program to increase "data literacy" among education leaders. Funded by The Wallace Foundation, the program aimed to transform the vast amounts of data collected during assessment tests into a tool that leaders could use to set policy and, above all, shape instruction.

"We are not sitting around in Santa Fe to try and 'catch' schools that are not doing well," Winograd explains. "Our goal is to help education leaders lead. We go around the state asking how we can help."

New Mexico school districts need a lot of help. One in five of New Mexico's 328,000 students is learning English as a foreign language, according to *Journey to Excellence*, a report produced this year by Winograd's office and the New Mexico Business Roundtable for Educational Excellence. One in five has a disability, and one in four students lives in poverty, which is the greatest barrier to student achievement, according to the report. In some districts, particularly in the southern part of the state, many students have at least one parent who entered the United States illegally. Nearly half of New Mexico's students live in five of the state's 89 school districts. More than half of the state's 801 schools are located in rural areas, often with out-of-date facilities, long bus routes, and few selling points when it comes to recruiting teachers. In the 2006–07 school year, 429 schools (53 percent) failed to meet AYP for NCLB. In 2004–05, when NCLB set the AYP bar lower, just 32 percent of New Mexico's schools failed to clear the hurdle. The rapidly rising AYP standard is increasing the pressure on school administrators to improve student achievement. The state hopes that easier access to better data will help schools reverse the downward trend and keep pace with federal requirements.

Paul gave her mysterious data CD to Winograd and his senior policy analyst, Beata Thorstensen, who in turn found a university professor to help unpack the data. The CD turned out to be comma-delimited ASCII data, a format commonly imported into Excel, a Microsoft spreadsheet program that almost all school districts own. The questions that Paul and many other educators wanted to ask could be posed and answered with pivot tables, an Excel function that extracts specific reports from raw data in Excel.

"We were delighted when we discovered pivot tables," Winograd says. "We did not have to ask districts to buy any proprietary software. They already had what they needed."

What some districts did not have was an expert to build the pivot tables. Winograd saw to it that superintendents in the Wallace project's six demonstration districts formed relationships with people who understood their questions and helped them query the data. The result

The design of data systems by state or local agencies seeks to anticipate data elements that will matter to leaders or their audiences. The extent to which they succeed in doing so has a lot to do with how useful leaders find them. Such data systems can also be cumbersome, as they often involve large-scale, routine data collection from sources such as district central offices. The quality and timeliness of the data they collect varies, in part a reflection of how the system attends to "data cleaning," a prerequisite for maintaining data accuracy (see Mieles & Foley, 2005; Stringfield, Wayman, & Yakimowski, 2005).

— *Data-Informed Leadership in Education*. Knapp, et al., October 2006.

has been a simple point-and-click set of tables that can break down student performance not just by grade and subject matter, but by particular teachers, individual students, even by the individual topics on the test.

These topics, known as “benchmarks,” are the smallest unit of testable knowledge on the NMSBA for which New Mexico releases student scores. A benchmark may be tested with a half dozen questions or more. Unlike neighboring Texas, the state does not publish the actual questions on the test. And while many New Mexico educators disdain what they call the “drill and kill” philosophy of Texas schools that teach to the test, most spend a great deal of time puzzling out the types of questions likely to surface in vaguely worded topics, such as these for 5th graders: “analyze cause and effect relationships” and “distinguish between fact and opinion.”

Even when the exact content of the exam is a bit uncertain, charting student performance against benchmarks is a wonderful tool. Paul, like most other superintendents in the state, would love to use state test results for planning. But so far, the data have not been delivered in time. The NMSBA tests are administered every March. Because students must write out answers to many questions in both math and language arts, grading the test takes time. Although the state is getting faster, the results have yet to be published before school starts in August. Principals cannot yet exploit test data to group students by strengths or weaknesses.

Using a short-cycle assessment

“Schools are running from March to March, from yearly test to yearly test,” Paul says. “And the cycle is just too long.” Instead of trying to second-guess the test results and plan with too little data, Paul asked Princeton Review to create a short-cycle assessment test that the district administers to all students at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. The short cycle results typically come back within two weeks. At \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year, the tests cost about \$10 per student per annum. So far, the investment has paid off: Student performance on the second short-cycle test, given in January, successfully predicted test results on the NMSBA, given in March, which gave Paul confidence that it accurately identifies students who need help.

“Schools have two months to intervene and work on problem areas before the state test,” Paul says. Like Aztec, most of the state’s 89 districts are moving toward some kind of short-cycle assessment, Winograd says. But many cannot afford to hire a pricey vendor like Princeton Review.

This September, just two years after Winograd interrupted her attempt to correlate data by hand, Paul received her third set of pivot tables from NMSBA data. She also began a new round of short-cycle assessments.

“It’s become a data-rich environment,” she says. “I’ve always asked principals the same two questions: ‘How’s business?’ and ‘How do you know?’ These days they all get out the data to show me.” Before long, school superintendents and principals across the state will have access to better data through the Student Teacher Accountability Reporting System (STARS), a data warehouse the state is building. STARS will keep a running account of budget, student-achievement, and staff data.

“Data is the current currency,” says Winograd, who has reached out to 140 principals in 30 districts to get feedback from end users of the new warehouse. “What you want to do is make sure that principals, superintendents, and other education leaders can use the data in the warehouse effectively to improve student achievement.”

The new emphasis on data has changed the culture of accountability in the Aztec district. Just as the superintendent asks principals for their data, so the principals expect teachers to account for student performance. “Now,” says Paul, “the facts are right there in the numbers. If a teacher is having trouble teaching algebra, we can see it. Data has helped us get egos out of teacher evaluations.” What principals ask of teachers, teachers ask of students. As she showed a visitor through one of her elementary schools, Paul pointed to a three-ring binder on a 2nd grader’s desk. My Data Book, the cover read.

“Everybody in the system is accountable for charting their own data,” Paul says. “The students learn it very early.”

From superintendents to 2nd graders, access to more meaningful data has transformed school districts throughout the state. In the Gadsden school district, which stretches from the border of Mexico and the city limits of El Paso, TX, halfway to Las Cruces — an area larger than Rhode Island — principals once ruled their schools like private fiefdoms.

“People used to make decisions by gut and by heart,” says Yvonne Lozano, Gadsden’s assistant superintendent for education. Teachers had a similar autonomy. They did things their own way and pointed to successful students as ones who “got it” or were particularly bright. When students did not progress, poor teaching and failing instructional programs were not the most likely suspects.

“Sometimes, teachers would just appeal to history,” Lozano says. “‘We’ve always done it this way.’ ” The problem with what they had always done? It had not usually worked. In fact, the district’s academic performance was ranked 88th of 89 districts in New Mexico in spring 1999. People made excuses: Many students were desperately poor. They came from the *colonias*, ghettos where people lacked not only steady work, but also running water, indoor plumbing, and often floors in their dwellings. When the parents lived on \$5,000 a year in a colonia, how could a public school educate the child? The district also had more than its share of recent immigrants and English language learners.

Lozano and her colleagues in the central office worried that the schools had given up. They led a “self-takeover” of the district in the 1999–2000 school year. First, they instituted strong central control in the district, where 14,000 students enroll in three preschools, 14 elementary schools, three middle schools, and four high schools. Lozano wanted to “treat the district more like a business,” so they took control of principals’ funds and monitored their budgets. They began to hire better teachers and take steps to eliminate those who were not performing well. The district began to inch up the rankings.

As NCLB began to generate more data, the district tried to use it. “Looking harder at data was part of our attempt to behave more like a business,” Lozano says. But it was not until it joined Winograd’s program in 2005 that the district made a breakthrough. “The Wallace project allowed us to look deeper into the data provided by the state,” Lozano says.

“We needed to be able to ask questions of the data — How are my 4th grade Hispanic students doing in reading? ... We needed answers to help us plan.”

Once again, the key to exploiting data was creating pivot tables. The district asked Ken Korn, a retired teacher from nearby El Paso, to create pivot tables. The results mirrored Aztec: Administrators quickly targeted specific areas in which students scored too low. Principals identified teachers who needed help and sent coaches into the classroom to model new lesson plans and share tips.

In Gadsden's system, the assistant principals' job description includes assisting in accountability. Lozano sent all 22 assistant principals in the system to Las Cruces, where Thorstensen trained them to use pivot tables. When they returned and brought their questions to Korn, he refined the tables to answer their new data queries. Before long, Lozano was calling the assistant principals "Ken Korn clones." The decision to focus on assistant principals had another important consequence: Gadsden had increased the data literacy of future principals in the district.

By 2006, the assistant principals had dug deep into the state testing data. For each of their 14,000 students, the district now had a benchmark profile. Every student's score on each benchmark was mapped not only against the total points available in that benchmark, but also against the score of the average proficient student. The results often were surprising.

"Many students who were not proficient in math or reading actually scored higher than the average proficient student on one or more benchmarks," Korn says. "We learned that students who weren't good enough on average were often very good at a few things. They weren't unable to learn. They already excelled at something. There were just a lot of things they hadn't been taught."

The next step will be to create a historical record for each child with respect to specific benchmarks. Even now, in the third year of NMSBA pivot tables, it has become possible to do some longitudinal work. Coming up with the right question may be the challenge. Korn is convinced the district has the data to answer it.

Charting progress of every student

This fall, some of the assistant principals trained in 2005 took over schools of their own. One of those new principals is Linda Perez, who took over Sunland Park Elementary School. As she had done as an assistant principal, she immediately set up a kind of "war room" to chart the progress of every student against key reading benchmarks. With only a few hundred students in her school, this chart takes up an entire wall. She and every teacher in the building can tell at a glance where any student stands.

Perez, the data maven, has other worries at her school, however. Before she showed a visitor the progress board charting student achievement, she pointed through the rear door of her cheerful turquoise school building to the chain-link fence marking the Mexican border. A border patrol lookout post stands atop a nearby bluff. A few times, she said, a man or woman has sprinted past her school on the way to America, presumably without a visa.

"The border patrol sometimes stops parents on the way to pick up their children," Perez notes coolly. "It makes it harder to get parental involvement at school."

What draws parents in, whatever their fears or misgivings, is student success. And Gadsden has made great strides in the last three years. In the latest ranking, Gadsden rose to third among 89 districts, just behind Albuquerque and Las Cruces. The businesslike, data-driven district is succeeding. "If you have a data sheet on each child year after year," Korn says, "you have a commitment to leaving no child behind."



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<https://doi.org/10.59656/EL-SB4792.001>

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UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Miller Hall 404, College of Education • University of Washington • Box 353600 • Seattle, WA 98195-3600

Phone: (206) 221-4114 • Fax: (206) 616-8158 • Email: ctpmail@u.washington.edu