Education Writers Association
SPECIAL REPORT

Searching for a SUPERHERO: Can Principals Do It All?

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OVERVIEW: what is GOOD Leadership?

Editor's note: much of this report is based on conversations at four meetings in 2001: the EWA 2001 National Seminar, held April in Phoenix; a December regional seminar on school leadership in Charlotte, N.C., and an August LEADERS Count conference of the Reader's Digest-Wallace Funds in Manitou Springs, Colo; and a conference on Teachers as Owners in St. Paul, Minn., last September.

In education, few agree about remedies to cure ailing schools. But on one point, almost everyone agrees: the principal is key to any kind of change.

But what makes a good school leader?

In the 1980s, movies and books romanticized the likes of Joe Clark, the bat-wielding, bad-ass principal of Paterson's Eastside High School in the 1980s, larger than life mavericks who did it their way.

But a consensus is growing that while the heroic principal might do good – or bad – in the short term, once he leaves, all the change vanishes with the last whiff of his charisma.

The truly effective principal is the first among equals, a team builder, a leader of leaders who encourages others to take responsibility for what happens in the school.

"The definition of power is all wrong," says Peter Negroni, College Board vice president and former Springfield (Mass.) Schools Superintendent. "It's not telling people what to do. The best form of governance is inclusive. It's about what is the goal and how do we work together to reach the goal. You're not going to have the same quality of principal in every school. So how do you create the [ethos] where people feel responsible for the kids? If you're always taking the side of the kids, you'll make a connection. "

Some traits of a good leader that are emerging in the small bits of research that exists:

- Delegates leadership
- Emphasizes instruction and putting children first
- Encourages continuous staff development
- Builds coalitions with staff, parents and the community
- Evaluates data, including test scores, absentee rates, discipline records, to assess strengths and weaknesses in the instructional program and make improvements.

University of Chicago researchers Penny Sebring and Anthony Bryk released a report out of the Consortium on Chicago School Research that showed schools where principals included teachers and parents in decision-making made the most improvements.

"Turning a school around is a such big task – no one can do it themselves. So we see principals trying to develop these other centers of power," Sebring says. "It's teachers who work directly with students, and parents who interact directly with their children, so they in turn will be stronger and more effective."

In other words, good school leaders don't always have to be born. They can be made.

Thomas Sergiovanni, professor at Trinity University in San Antonio, notes that a good leader successfully brings a school through several phases. The "superhero" principal might do the first and second phases well, but falter on

the rest. Sergiovanni's phases include command and control at first, followed by "bartering," or using incentives and punishments to get what is needed. Once a school is stable, the leader follows up with training and support and building morale. Finally, the principal should win the staff over to a set of ideas, especially that all children can learn, he says. Then they are "morally" involved in their work. He estimates it takes about four or five years for the turnaround to be complete.

It's a matter of principles instead of principal.

"The first stage is hooked to the principal," he says. "Then you get people unhooked from you and hooked to a set of ideas, or principles. People are now doing things not because of the principal, then it perpetuates itself. People get socialized into the ideals of the school."

The definition of what makes a good principal has changed in recent years with the growing accountability movement. Principals used to be managers. Now they also must be leaders and some aren't quite sure how to do it.

During the Phoenix meeting, Cheryl Tibbals, formerly of the Council for Chief State School Officers, described her experience in Kentucky in the heyday of its reforms and the struggles principals confronted.

"I have had many principals come to me and say, we advanced the first two years and did better on our assessments, but now we've hit a glass ceiling," Tibbals said. "And my response is, no, you haven't really changed the system. You have to really reorganize everything you're doing and the standards are at the core of it, and from that develop school leaders."

In Charlotte, Negroni echoed her words.

"The bottom line is you teach the kids so they can learn. This is hard work," he says. "Principals have never been expected to do this before."

A Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds retreat on leadership explored the challenges surrounding leadership and connecting it to successful reform. Wallace Funds evaluation director Edward Pauly summed it up this way: "We've got our work cut out for us, in particular, all of our leaders, not just principals and superintendents," he said. "They're already staggeringly overburdened. We can't ask for Superman....Systems and structures and conditions have to be reimagined."

"The bottom line is you teach the kids so they can learn. This is hard work. Principals have never been expected to do this before."

Peter Negroni, *College Board and former Springfield, Mass., schools superintendent*

Lauren Resnick, University of Pittsburgh Learning and Research Development Center's Checklist:

- Ask the principal to take you through the building to as many classes as possible.
- Note whether the principal steers you to certain classrooms, or whether every door is open.
- Observe how the principal interacts with teachers, students and visitors.
- Can the principal explain what is going on inside these classrooms?
- Does he or she know how to get that information?
- Does the principal have something to say about what that teacher was like two months ago and now?
- Does the principal know the kids?

Source: Leadership and Student Learning, a report on the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds Second annual LEADERS Count Conference

Advice for reporters assessing principal quality:

- First and foremost, visit the schools you plan to rate.
- Look at test scores and whether there is a slow steady trend upward.
- Ask teachers about the mission of the school. If they give consistent answers, the school has a coherent goal. If you don't get consistent answers, that's a bad sign.
- Talk to teachers, talk to parents, and talk to students.
- Look at the school culture. Is there a clear culture of high expectations, or do you hear talk of "those kids" and excuses why "those kids" can't learn.
- Sit in a teachers' lounge for four or five hours to eavesdrop on conversations. What do the teachers talk about it? If it's complaints, something is wrong. If they seriously discuss ways to improve instruction or teaching methods, something is right.
- Provide context, looking critically at other players, too. For instance, if a state puts a school on notice to improve but provides little assistance, that is like "a doctor diagnosing high cholesterol without telling you what to do about it," says Kent Peterson, University of Wisconsin professor and researcher on education leadership.
- Look for an emphasis on professional development for everyone.
- Determine whether the principal and the school have the authority to make decisions, or whether a principal's hands are tied by central administration.

Source: Kent Peterson, University of Wisconsin; Jonathan Schnur, New Leaders for New Schools at EWA conference Nov. 30-Dec. 1, 2001 in Charlotte, N.C.

The Wallace Funds is underwriting research to study leadership roles in education reform and grants to help districts, schools and others to strengthen it. The $150 million initiative, called LEADERS Count, has three goals: to strengthen the pool of principal and superintendent applicants, to strengthen the ability of superintendents and principals to improve learning, and create conditions so principals and superintendents can become successful.

The foundation found scant research connecting what principals and superintendents do to what students learn.

Yet, a MetLife survey, The American Teacher 2001, shows a serious mismatch between students' perceptions of their teachers and the principals' perceptions, especially in secondary schools. Seven out of 10 principals think that the academic standards in their schools are high, while only 38 percent of students believe the same thing, according to the survey. Only one-fourth of students are "very satisfied" with their relationship with their principal. And 73 percent of principals rate their teachers high on caring about students. Only 38 percent of students, on the other hand, say their schools' academic standards are high. And only one-fourth say teachers have high expectations for all students.

And according to the survey, teachers and principals in schools with high minority populations are less likely to be satisfied with their relationships and are less likely to describe the teachers as committed to their jobs.

While some traits may be easy to define, the job overall is not. Some argue that principals need to be good instructional leaders. Others argue that they need political skills to survive – and to bring together constituents – from teachers, parents and the community to the superintendent, school board and students themselves.

As Junious Williams, CEO of the Urban Strategies Council, put it during the August meeting: "Is the principal a pilot? Or do they just get the planes to fly?" After all, he noted, the CEO of United Airlines is not a pilot.

University of Pittsburgh researcher Lauren Resnick argued at the same meeting that a principal should be comfortable in a classroom and should be able to recognize good instruction.

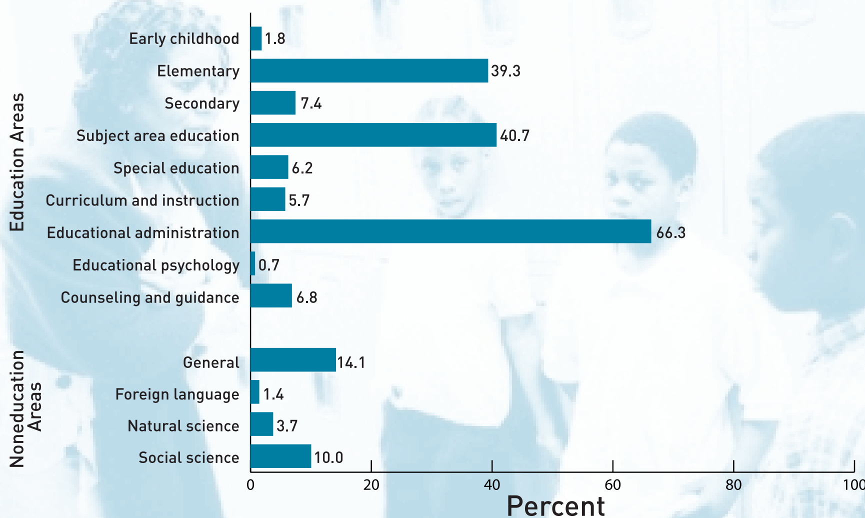
But the job can be overwhelming. And as consultant Robert Evans noted in August, while everyone favors "corporate-style turnarounds," no one wants to give superintendents or principals corporate -style leverage to do the job.

From The K-8 Principal 1998: a Ten-Year Study

(Seventh in a Series of Research Studies Launched in 1928), James Doud and Edward P. Keller, National Association of Elementary School Principals. The survey was answered by 1,323 randomly selected principals in the spring of 1997.

- 70 percent reported they had experienced increased involvement in marketing/politics to generate support for their school and education in general over the last three years.
- 66 percent reported more contact with social service agencies.
- 60 percent reported increased involvement with planning and development of site-based staff development
- Only 36.6 percent of urban principals have primary responsibility for selecting teachers.
- 58.6 percent have 10 or more years experience as a principal.
- The turnover rate for principals from 1988 to 1998 was nearly 42 percent.
- The average K-8 principal worked 54 hours a week.
- Job security concerns: nothing stood out as a concern. But unsatisfactory student performance came closest, with for 32.4 percent of principals saying it was a major concern. More urban principals rated unsatisfactory student performance as a concern (38.7 percent).

Percentage of public school principals by field of study for bachelor's and higher degrees: 1993-94

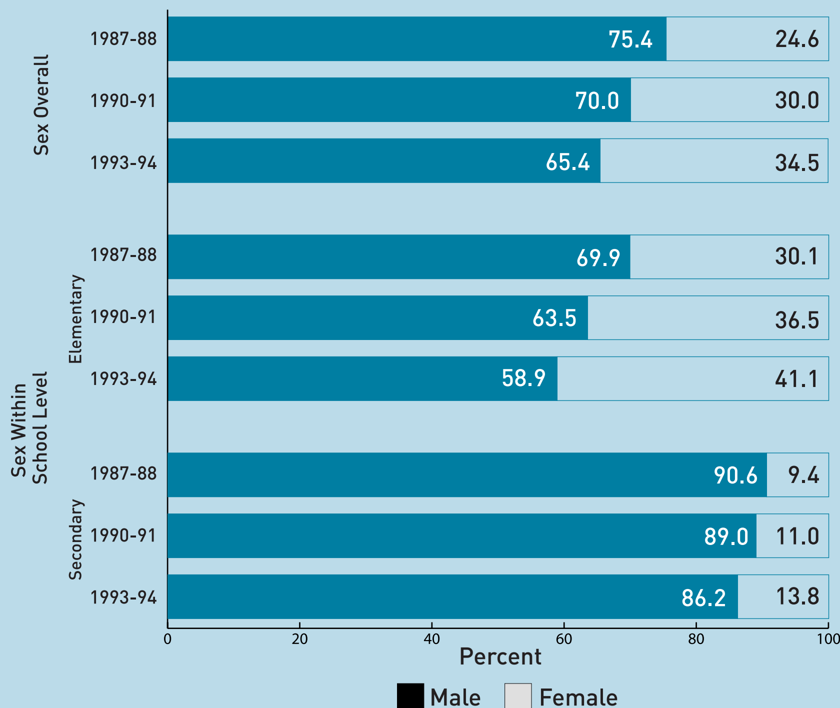


Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993-94(Principal Questionnaire).

Trends

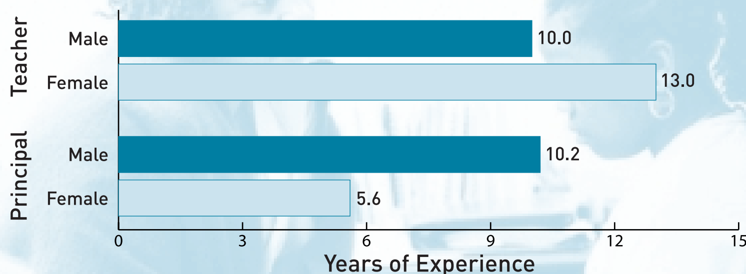
As with teachers, districts and schools of education express alarm about a predicted principal shortage. The average age of a principal has crept up and surveys indicate that many principals – as many as 40 percent – intend to retire in the next decade. In fact, according to a 1998 survey of K-8 principals, the turnover rate for principals since 1988 was 41 percent. New York City, for instance, experiences horrendous shortages.

Percentage of public school principals by sex and sex within school level: 1987-88; 1990-91, and 1993-1994



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1987-88(Administrator Questionnaire), 1990-91(Administrator Questionnaire), 1993-94(Principal Questionnaire).

Public school principals' average years of experience as teachers and principals: 1993-94



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993-94(Principal Questionnaire).

The New York Times and other papers reported that nearly 163 schools opened their doors without a permanent leader last year and in fact, more than a third of New York principals had less than two years of experience. The National Conference of State Legislators in January estimated that Colorado would face filling 740 principal openings in the next five years.

The Education Research Service (ERS) conducted a survey of superintendents for the two principals associations, the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. It found that superintendents of half the districts reported shortages of qualified applicants for principal jobs and the shortage ran across all kinds of schools.

Exacerbating the problem is teachers' unwillingness to leave the classroom and move into administrative ranks. ERS, in the "Principal: Keystone of a High-Achieving School," cites a Louisiana survey of teachers certified to be administrators that shows only 100 of 215 teachers with the proper certification were even willing to apply for a principalship. The teachers cited reasons from stressful conditions, to lack of resources to the increased complexity and responsibility of the job.

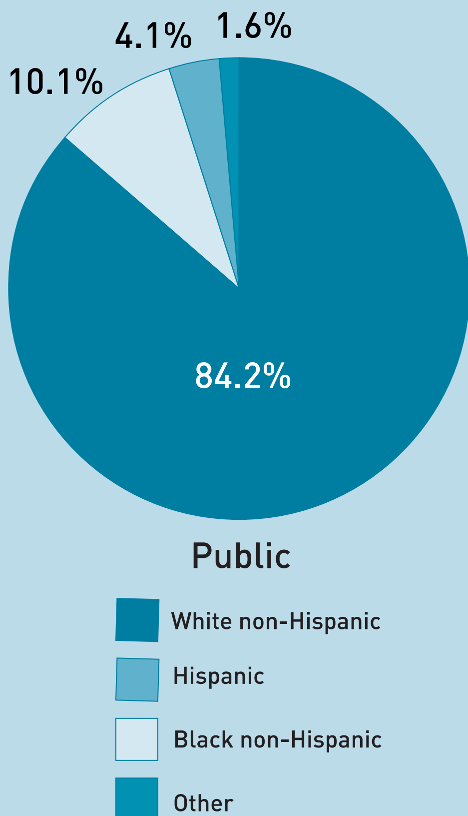
Harvard University professor Richard Elmore also blames the situation on the system that has haphazardly evolved. Teachers get a boost to their salaries by earning masters' degrees. It's easy to earn one in education administration. Education schools get the tuition. So school districts get people who are paper-qualified, teachers get salary lifts and ed schools get extra income.

A long term survey of K-8 principals, started 50 years ago, shows that while principals are being held more accountable, their authority is still limited in big school systems. Pay is the biggest issue. James Doud, chairman of the department of Educational Leadership at the University of Florida who conducted the survey, found that based on principals' estimates of how many hours a week they work, many (aspiring) principals take a pay cut when they leave teaching for administration.

"If that's true, why would people decide to leave the classroom and work more months and actually take a pay cut?" he asks. "In the last 20 years, there has been considerably more responsibility put on principals, and the salary differential has gotten smaller...Teacher salaries had been so low, people made effort to improve teacher salaries, so over a period of years, it's been going up more than principals. Yet a lot more responsibility was put on the principal."

Nonetheless, the average principal does not express dissatisfaction with his or her job. But they are reporting more stress, Doud says.

Percentage of public school principals by race-ethnicity: 1993-94



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993-94(Principal Questionnaire).

"We're overlooking a very capable pool of potential leaders," Leslie Fenwick, vice president of the Southern Education Foundation, said. "Look at who is not being tapped. Females have been undercultivated. We may not even have to look outside education."

There's not just a pending principal shortage, but a shortage of female, black and Hispanic principals as well. Consider the most recent statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics: in 1994, only 10 percent of all principals were African-American. Only 4 percent were Hispanic. Women now occupy about 42% of the elementary (K-8) principalships, yet comprise about 85% of the teachers in these same schools.

Also a telling statistic: one-third of male principals came to the principalship through athletic coaching, while that remained a rare experience for female principals.

Now there is growing concern among educators because the demographics of principals and faculty are becoming increasingly skewed from student demographics. In another 30 years, American students will be majority minority.

While Elmore criticizes the present system of training and the numbers of "unqualified, credentialed" people, Leslie T. Fenwick, vice president of the Southern Education Foundation, views the large numbers of people who haven't made the transition as an untapped pool.

"We're overlooking a very capable pool of potential leaders," Fenwick said at the December EWA meeting. "Look at who is not being tapped. Females have been undercultivated. We may not even have to look outside education."

The problem is the job is not desirable, she says. "Look at why teachers choose to stay in the classroom. In the classroom, you can make a difference," she says. "To move on or to become a principal, they see this as a totally opposite proposition. It means moving from influencing lives to becoming an educrat."

A problem is researchers really haven't looked at the problem. They haven't spent a lot of time looking at who gets the best principals, although they have looked at teacher quality, Fenwick says.

Another telling statistic from the NCES report: more women and minority principals went through aspiring principal training programs than white males before joining the ranks.

Preparation and Training

How principals are trained is becoming almost as big an issue as how teachers are trained.

And as with teachers, education administration programs are almost universally deplored. Harvard's Elmore calls them "puppy mills."

"We have a vast array of institutions who I've characterized as puppy mills, who continue to turn out unqualified and credentialed people," he said at the Phoenix meeting. "The content and institutional structure of existing training programs are fundamentally unsuited for the jobs we are asking. These include the university-based programs and credit accumulation programs outside the university structure."

He noted that as many as 80 percent of the credentialed pool come from the lowest quality preparation programs.

It's something that current principals agree is a problem. Ken Prichard, principal of Woodland High School in Bartow County, Ga., is recognized for his work at Loganville High school, which was singled out by U.S. News and World Report for its dramatic gains in student achievement and parental involvement. He finds that college and university professors are so far removed from the world of principals that they have forgotten what it means to lead a school.

"A lot of principals don't know what educational leadership means," he told an EWA regional seminar on

education leadership in Charlotte. "They're not familiar with what that is. They think leadership is scheduling, planning, buses, seeing that it happens short of doing it yourself."

In response to the poor training, principal academies – usually a collaboration of school districts, administrator associations, and colleges and universities – are sprouting up everywhere. Fenwick notes that they are often collaborations between school districts and second-tier or third-tier colleges.

Jonathan Schnur, the chief executive officer, is a former adviser to the Clinton White House and former Vice President Al Gore. New Leaders for New Schools started with five students in the Harvard University Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Business School.

Schnur calls it a "medical-style" residency program, where aspirants serve an internship in a school. Often teachers are afraid to become principals, not because they don't want to lead a school, but for other reasons, he said at the EWA meeting in Charlotte.

"They're scared of going into a bureaucratic morass," he says. "They're going to be at the mercies of school systems that they don't trust. They want to be part of an ongoing effort to change lives...We tried to design programs to address these issues."

Another source of problems in training may be assistant principals. Too often – especially in high schools and middle schools – they are delegated to certain tasks, such as discipline or curriculum. Principals and the central office often don't try to groom assistant principals for the eventual step up, speakers at the regional conference said.

"Every assistant principal ought to be a principal in training," principal Prichard says. He dabbled in central administration for a few months before fleeing back to school management. "They shouldn't get pigeonholed with discipline, or attendance or even curriculum."

Gene Bottoms, senior vice president of the Southern Regional Education Board, and director of its successful High Schools That Work program that Prichard is involved in, says districts

Principal Training

A prime example of a principal training program that draws accolades from experts and researchers is the Delta State University program in Mississippi, which provides training for future principals in the rural regions of the Mississippi Delta.

Fifteen prospective principals are selected for the program each year. Often they are nominated by their school districts, although some scholarships are offered to teachers who apply on their own. They serve as interns under mentor principals for a year, while attending classes. Mississippi is one of the few states where students can earn salaries while participating. These paid sabbaticals require students to work in the sponsoring school district after the program is completed.

Delta State started the program in 1998, calling on the expertise of a national panel to provide help on developing the program, says Sue Jolly, the program's coordinator.

The program is about to launch a study to measure its graduates' success. It will send out surveys to school administrators, asking them to rate the students' skills, as well as surveying graduates themselves. So far, it has had mentors evaluate students, and has informally surveyed graduates to get feedback, Jolly says.

"The real divide is between theory and practice," says Joseph Murphy, director of the Ohio Principal Leadership Academy, and expert on school leadership. "Professors have an inability to bring the real world into the classroom, and practitioners are unable to interpret theory," he says. "There is a lack of connection to practice."

One organization is approaching the training of principals along the lines of the group Teach for America, trying to recruit top-notch candidates to go through a year-long residency at urban schools with mentor principals. New Leaders for New Schools was founded two years ago and started preparing its first crop of principals in New York and Chicago last summer. Near the end of the internship, New Leaders plans to find openings for its recruits in school districts and charter schools that allow principals autonomy over budgets and hiring. And for the next two years, the graduates will receive support from the program. NLNS plans to expand the program in the two cities over the summer and add another city to the roster.

From Public Agenda report, "Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership," released November 2001

- 46 percent of principals say talented colleagues who leave the field are most likely to leave because they are frustrated by politics and bureaucracy. Another 34 percent say they leave because of unreasonable demands brought about by higher standards and accountability.
- 70 percent say that managing harsh public criticism and political heat has become routine part of their job
- 48 percent of principals say you can usually get things done the way you want, but you must work around the system.
- 32 percent of principals say they have enough freedom and autonomy to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom and an equal percentage say they have the capacity to reward outstanding teachers and staff.
- 54 percent of principals in urban districts say they need a lot more autonomy to remove ineffective teachers.
- 71 percent of principals say they have enough freedom and autonomy to hire teachers and other staff.
- 48 percent of principals say they think it's a bad idea to hold principals accountable for student standardized test scores at the building level.
- 69 percent say that making it easier to remove bad teachers would be a "very effective way" of improving leadership in the nation's schools. Another 65 percent ranked improving pay and prestige of administrators as very effective; and 54 percent found improving the quality of professional development for administrators as a very effective approach.
- 69 percent of principals say that the typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district. 66 percent also say too much of administrative professional development is impractical and focuses on the wrong things.

"A lot of principals don't know what educational leadership means. They're not familiar with what that is. They think leadership is scheduling, planning, buses, seeing that it happens short of doing yourself."

Ken Prichard, *Principal Woodland High School, Barstow, Ga.*

don't put thought into succession.

Another issue is whether leaders should be groomed within the system – as with the Delta State program (see Sidebar) – or people should be encouraged to pursue management as something they are interested in. Bottoms noted that the Houston Independent School District encourages self-selection to try to dry up the old-boy network that is too prevalent in other school systems.

Turning around a school culture

Here's a quandary. A good school leader is easily identifiable and some successfully turn around failing schools. But some schools are so bad, even the most effective school principal might find them difficult to steer in the right direction. Experts like Charles Payne of Duke University and Kent Peterson of the University of Wisconsin call them "toxic school cultures."

Such a school has low morale. Everyone is angry. Teachers talk past each other and they splinter into faction groups, pitting older teachers against younger ones, or primary grade teachers against intermediate grade faculty. The atmosphere can have a strong racial component to it, as well, Payne points out. Teachers might pretend to get along, but interview them in separate black and white groups, and the white teachers will tell you the black teachers are too authoritarian and the black teachers will see the white teachers as too lax, he says. Programs quickly get described as a "black" program or a "white" program.

"The principals aren't strong instructional leaders – they say with great truth that they are overwhelmed," Payne says. "But give them the time to be (leaders) and they won't do it."

Just getting teachers to talk to each other frankly would be a sign of progress, he told an EWA conference.

These schools are so fractured, they cannot even follow through on the simplest of reforms that everyone supports.

Five Common Strategies for Successful Schools

From Just for the Kids "Promising Practices Study of High-Performing Schools"

1. Take initiative: Make no excuses and strive for success
2. Develop and execute a clear strategy for improvement
3. Continuously assess progress and intervene immediately when students or teachers are struggling.
4. Make high-quality teaching and research-based instructional practice the top priority.
5. Collaborate, both inside and outside the school.

For instance, such a school might have unanimous agreement to implement a school uniform policy, yet two or three years later, it still is not in place, Payne notes.

Peterson tells stories of a school where dedicated teachers described it like Sarajevo. He estimates it will take three to five years to turn around such a school. If you don't have a unifying force, a school is more like a "hotel for teachers," he says.

But experts – including Payne – say that in those bottom of the barrel instances, a big stick might be a good thing to wield. "Coercion has a place in this," Payne says. "You cannot do these demoralized schools without coercion."

But while coercion may be necessary to jumpstart the worst schools, they are unlikly to experience deep change with development of their human and social capital, Payne adds. Michael Fullan of the University of Toronto suggests that reconstitution may be the only solution in cases like these. For a long time, researchers and experts focused on the school level leadership. In cases like these, the district or state must step forward, he says.

"Site-based management assumed everything has to be solved at the school and community level, but now we've seen that some schools will not develop on their own," he says.

So effective principals shape their staff by hook or by crook, getting rid of the deadwood or even the teachers whose views may clash. "It's important to do this because they can poison the rest of the staff," says Payne.

Teachers as Leaders

What if a school had no principal? A concept is now floating that would take even more radical steps and abolish the principal all together. It is starting in the same state where the charter school movement came into being - at one of the earliest charter schools in the state, formed in 1994.

Minnesota New Country School in rural Henderson breaks several molds. It is a small school serving 117 students in grades seven to 12. It has no classrooms, no separate subjects. Instead, students design projects with the assistance of their teachers, known as advisors, that incorporate Minnesota standards. The teachers work as a cooperative with no principal in charge.

The group devotes 60 percent of the budget to salaries - which is much lower than the salary heavy budgets of average school districts. Raises are awarded based on performance, with a grid judged by peers, as well as student and parent evaluations. Yet the teachers typically receive higher than average salaries. In addition, teachers are given supplements for taking on additional duties.

"You wouldn't keep a lawyer at a law firm if he didn't pull his weight," says Dee Thomas, a co-founder of the school and a teacher there. "Value doesn't mean you're a star if you have a master's degree."

Thomas also uses another analogy to describe the difference between employment and ownership. "Your attitude is different when you work for a hardware store or own a hardware store," she said.

The school saves money on other expenses, such as custodians, meaning "you have to be willing to scrub toilets with our kids," as Thomas puts it. About one-fifth of the money is put into savings.

The teachers can be more responsive to parent and student concerns, the teachers pointed out. "If tonight we decide something needs to change, it changes tomorrow," Thomas said.

"Leadership is being used as a synonym for administration. We have always been sloppy in our talk about leadership and management."

Adam Urbanski, *president of the Rochester Teachers Association and co-founder of the Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN)*

Data

A new trend – and one that might seem glaringly obvious to outsiders – is the use of data to improve instruction, attendance, and other elements of school.

Schools and school districts collect enormous amounts of data for state and federal officials. They generate data on the number of students in poverty – as defined by the federally subsidized meal programs. They must report on attendance to receive state funding. Test scores are a must – from district tests to state-sanctioned ones.

Yet, as Ted Creighton, a former schools superintendent and professor at Sam Houston State University, puts it, "We put it in a pile somewhere and thought we were done."

Yet schools could use data to improve not just instruction, but attendance and discipline. As Creighton points out, 94 percent might sound like a great attendance rate, but if you look at the whole picture, kids are still missing on average, approximately two weeks of school (6% of 180 days). It all goes back – once more – to training. Principals and teachers are not trained to use data, he says.

Among those pushing the movement toward data-based decision-making is the nonprofit, Texas-based organization, Just for the Kids, which is promoting the use of data not just among educators, but parents and policy-makers as well.

For Holly Fisackerly, the revelation of just how data could help came through a workshop her school district conducted with the help of Just for the Kids. The former Worsham Elementary

School principal in Aldine, Texas could have been excused if she already thought her school was successful. It had one of the highest passing rates for the Texas state tests.

Now the school's students, mostly poor, a majority non-English speakers, don't just pass the test, but reach the proficient levels on the test. And Fisackerly joined the Just for the Kids staff last year to promote data-based decision making.

"It has become second nature for my teachers to use data," Fisackerly says. "We looked at all of our kids as if they were gifted and taught them that way."

DO SCHOOLS NEED PRINCIPALS?

A nascent movement argues that schools may not need principals at all. In the beginnings of the American school system, principal was short for principal teacher, after all.

And some would argue that leadership in a school doesn't need to start with principals – it can start with teachers. To Adam Urbanski, president of the Rochester Teachers Association and co-founder of the Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN), too many people equate school leadership with school administration or management.

"Leadership is being used as a synonym for administration," he says. "We have always been sloppy in our talk about leadership and management."

Urbanski has called for teachers to take a strong leadership role in instruction and to get the chance for promotions without leaving teaching, such as master teachers who teach part-time and mentor the rest.

Ted Kolderie of the Center for Policy Studies in St. Paul and Ed Dirkswager, a retired businessman consulting for the center, explored the idea of teachers forming professional partnerships and cutting out the middle man – the principal. The partnerships can range from cooperatives to even professional firms, along the lines of law or architecture firms or medical practices. A book looking at the concept titled "Teachers as Owners – a key to revitalizing public education" will be released in June 7 through Scarecrow Press. A draft version came out in September, along with a meeting in St. Paul at Hamline University.

The book and the conference uses the EdVisions Cooperative, which launched at the New Country School and now has nine charters in the state under its umbrella and 120 teacher members, as an example.

The teachers at the schools pay into the cooperative to take care of payroll and benefits, as well as other administrative matters. The cooperative also has received grants from the Gates Foundation to spread its instructional model – project-based learning.

Teachers have found there are advantages and disadvantages – for instance, sacrificing the perk of accumulating significant numbers of sick days.

Another form of the model is developing in Milwaukee at the IDEAL charter school. The teachers running the school are still employees of the Milwaukee school system, but the school operates free of other constraints. For instance, the school can select the staff and the district will assign them.

Cooperatives may be something unique to Minnesota's history as a farming state. As someone at the Hamline conference pointed out, cooperatives have a vaguely sinister connotation in other parts of the country. Hence, other angles on the concept have to be developed.

David Ferrero, an education officer from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, suggested during the conference that pitching the idea to rank and file probably will end up with not much interest.

"You need to take a missionary approach," he said. "Find young people, found a new church, it has to be a grass roots model."

Another question posed by Eric Hirsch of the National Conference of State Legislators: with all the negative attitudes in the public about teachers, how do you overcome doubts about the teaching profession?

SPECIAL REPORT

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Challenges still face the concept of cooperative power. For instance, liability is a growing issue among school districts, and could well be a financial burden for such partnerships, as well as unemployment and other such mundane issues. Some teachers, as pointed out during the conference, have trouble grasping the concept of ownership instead of employment, and that can mean some teachers do more of the work and suffer burnout.

Still, "We want students to have ownership of their learning, so they need to see us owning our teaching," said David Greenberg, a teacher at El Colegio Charter School in Minneapolis. "It's a subtle thing."

And as another New Country teacher, Dean Lind put it: "We haven't got it down quite right with the cooperative – we're not perfect, but we have the structure in place."

Teachers, like nationally-acclaimed biology instructor Cindy Moss, who recently won a Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award, find the idea appealing. Moss reviewed the EdVisions ideas for EWA's December meeting. She said later she thought schools could invest much more money directly into instruction if middle management were eliminated. She noted that at her 2,200-student school in Charlotte, the principal makes more than $100,000 and it also has eight administrators making at least $70,000, to say nothing of the security specialists escorting students to the restroom or off campus. That's money that could be plowed back into smaller classes and more teachers, she says.

"It seems to me that "real" shared decision making is a great way to cut the costs of administration and still take care of necessary administration," she says.

Teacher Union Reform Network founder Urbanski also is intrigued by the idea, but predicts another decade or two will pass before it can take off. He sees a move toward a school-centered form of governance instead of school districts. When that happens, then such efforts can blossom, he predicts.

"Then we'll see teachers acting as entrepreneurs and forming partnerships," Urbanski says.

Author Dirkswager hopes that it will at least get people to think beyond the usual school hierarchy – beyond administrators as leaders and teachers as employees.

Conclusion

So much is up in the air with school leadership, including its definition. And the system seems slow to move away from its typical inertia, experts observe.

"That grinding sound you hear out there is a system waking up to the fact that it is now responsible for the learning of children. It's metal on metal. It's not very well lubricated," Elmore says. "As these systems begin to reorient themselves to a more performance-based view of their work...then we can have a system in which schools and districts and colleges of education and universities have very strong incentives for working on these instructional problems because they'll get credit for producing performance."

But what should reporters do to confront this issue? Everyone from researchers to principals themselves have varying degrees of advice. But one way reporters can really grasp the role of the principal is by following one.

"I would give you one simple recommendation here when you're writing about education: when was the last time that you actually went through a high school day?" asks Beverly Hurley, Los Fresnos High School principal, 2001 MetLife/NASSP National High School Principal of the Year and the 2000 Arizona Principal of the Year.

That was the advice of participants in the LEADERS Count meeting when EWA held an impromptu session.

Ellen Guiney, executive director of The Boston Plan for Excellence, noted that coverage of principals tends to portray them as heroes. That's wrong, she says.

And Marla Ucelli, an official of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, warned that everyone looking at education reform and ways to fix problems should keep one thing in mind:

"You can't fix anything by trying to fix everything."

> **"That grinding sound you hear out there is a system waking up to the fact that it is now responsible for the learning of children. It's metal on metal. It's not very well lubricated," Harvard University professor Richard Elmore says. "As these systems begin to reorient themselves to a more performance-based view of their work...then we can have a system in which schools and districts and colleges of education and universities have very strong incentives for working on these instructional problems because they'll get credit for producing performance."**

INSTRUCTION and nothing but instruction motivates SCHOOL AND PRINCIPAL

BALTIMORE – Irma Johnson keeps a pair of black high-heeled shoes behind her desk. But most of the time she wears walking slippers – with good reason.

As principal of Dallas F. Nicholas Elementary School in the Baltimore City school system, Johnson is perpetually in motion, moving from room to room in the three-story building to observe teachers, make notes and talk to students, occasionally dressing down noisy ones in the hallways.

Built in the 1970s as an open-classroom school with no walls, Dallas Nicholas presents a special management challenge. Though walls were added recently, there are gaps at the ceiling that allow noise to build and travel – hence Johnson's stern reaction to boisterous chatter in hallways and cafeteria rooms.

The 400-plus student body at Dallas Nicholas is typical of inner-city schools: All are low- income, being eligible for free- and reduced-price lunches; all are minority, mainly African American with a sprinkling of Asians and Hispanics.

However, the school's achievement level is a standout. On both the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) and the norm-referenced Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Dallas Nicholas scores are among the highest in the city school system. On some subjects, they are just below or just above the state average. The principal attributes much of the school's increasing success on a reduction in class sizes – classes used to have 25 to 30 students; now they have about 18.

Johnson calls her students my children with fierce possessiveness. She has served as principal for four years and assistant principal for three at Nicholas. After following Johnson for the day, it's clear why the school is on the upswing: instruction is the central focus and everything else is built around that. In fact, the theme of Dallas Nicholas is "instruction and nothing but instruction."

Kess-Wilson lists some of the terms they should know: opportunity cost, the impact of economic specialization on the growth of communities, capital.

"Not all at the same time?" asks Johnson.

Kess-Wilson says her students could easily understand that limited resources lead to economic problems, but she feels that the learning outcome of the lesson should be more challenging than

Irma Johnson, *principal of Dallas Nicholas Elementary School in Baltimore.*

And one element is periodic meetings between Johnson and individual teachers to review instructional plans. This morning, Johnson is meeting with Cynthia Kess-Wilson, a third-grade teacher who will be focusing on economics.

"What do you want them to know?" Johnson asks. When Kess-Wilson hesitates, Johnson gently prompts her: "Why don't you think out loud? Maybe I can help you."

that. Johnson encourages her to think harder about the outcomes; they also discuss methods Kess-Wilson will be using to get her lessons across.

Then they turn to the students themselves. One little girl is having trouble in both behaving and learning. She lives with her grandmother on weekdays and her mother on weekends. Her mother is belligerent, the teacher and principal agree, coming in to curse at the faculty, although she calmed down once Kess-

Wilson showed her the daughter's grades. "The mother is not the primary caregiver," points out Johnson, suggesting they invite the girl's grandmother and aunt to observe the child in the classroom.

The conference done, Johnson goes on patrol. Children run up to her for hugs or to show off their work. Other times, she gives impromptu lectures to misbehavers. One boy with a chiseled face gets a talk-to about his violence – he hit another boy in the face. Johnson believes he has severe emotional problems and needs help. Later in the day, he shyly hands a paper to Johnson to praise. It reads, "I wish I had a hundred dollars because then Michael Jackson would be my friend." This being the 100th day of school, lessons revolve around the concept of 100.

More formal professional development also is a priority at Dallas Nicholas. Teachers meet in teams for 45 minutes a day while their children attend art, physical education or library classes. On one particular day, the kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers review the findings of a consultant from the school's reading program, Open Court, with the assistant principal, Regina Patterson. There is good news on most fronts, she tells them. The consultant especially praised one teacher's exercise where students hunched up to illustrate a short 'I' and stretched out to illustrate a long one. But the teachers say they are struggling to get the concepts of short and long vowels across to the children. Patterson hands out some activities and rhyming strategies.

Johnson sits back and listens during most of the meeting. Near the end she brings up an issue raised by the intermediate-grade teachers: Students are coming to them with weak comprehension skills."We've done a wonderful job on phonics and decoding," she says. "Now we need to work on comprehension."

The teachers discuss some strategies they can use to make sure kids understand what they're reading — for instance, using "wondering," or asking students to anticipate where a story is going.

Then the talk turns to students. They talk about a one-armed child and how the teacher is assisting her with writing exercises. Johnson brings up other children's names and asks how they are doing. She asks teachers to bring up their own concerns.

After the meeting ends, Johnson begins her patrol again. She stops in to check with her Americorps volunteer and with her special education screening coordinator. They talk about the little boy with the violence problems. He is receiving counseling through an arrangement with Johns Hopkins University, which sends a mental health expert to work with students at the school.

The program illustrates the strong community involvement in the school. A local church tutors second-graders. Students from Loyola University work with Dallas Nicholas kids on a book-reading competition and tutor children one on one. Johns Hopkins provides mental health counseling and, as part of research on the impact of volunteering on the lives of senior citizens, arranges for senior citizens to work at the school.

Johnson then stops in a teacher's classroom, pulling out an observation checklist from her clip board. All teachers are supposed to list their objectives for the day, the week or the month on the chalkboard until their children achieve them. This day, the preschool teacher is working on the letter O. While the objective is posted, the Maryland standards are not. Johnson makes a note to remind her to post the standards. Otherwise, she's satisfied with the progress of the lesson.

Another pre-school teacher is working with her students on J. The teacher asks them for words beginning with J. "I got one! I got one!" an eager boy calls out, opening the flood gates. "Jelly!" Jellybean!" "Jack in the box!" Jell-O!" "Jackie!" Jake!" Joker!" "Jasmine," says a mischievous- faced boy, eyeing his classmate Jasmine slyly. A Korean boy, new to the country, suggests "yellow." Then as the teacher gently prompts him, he switches to his own name, Jian.

As Johnson traverses the classrooms, she stops to tie a tiny girl's shoelaces, while two others hover in the background. She talks to a father visiting his daughter's classroom. He is trying to gain custody of his son, who is attending another school, in hopes of transferring him to Dallas Nicholas. "I like the work he was doing here," he tells her.

She moves on to another room, where she sees kids squirming. The teacher is trying to call up folktales on the Internet. When Johnson arrives, he moves the first-graders to storytelling. The objective of the lesson is not posted, and Johnson is clearly unhappy. She pulls out her clipboard and starts taking copious notes. The teacher reads kids a Chinese tale that resembles "Little Red Riding Hood." At first the children listen attentively, but then start to squirm.

From "Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do" National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001

- Lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center.
- Set high expectations and standards for the academic and social development of all students and the performance of adults.
- Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed upon academic standards.
- Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other goals.
- Use multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify and apply instructional improvement.
- Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student and school success.

They glance back at Johnson. So does the teacher. It's not obvious to an outside observer what the point of the lesson is. After the children leave, Johnson says, "I'm not pleased." She asks to meet with the teacher the next day about his lesson planning.

Most of the time, Johnson uses her observations to give teachers constructive criticism. Every once in a while, she uses it to take teachers to task. But Johnson believes she has built a solid team. The school's staff is stable — nine of 17 faculty members have 10 or more years of experience – a high proportion at any school. She weeded out most of the bad teachers when she was assistant principal, she says.

It's now almost 1 p.m. and Johnson finally takes a lunch break. She tutors a 12-year-old fourth- grader while sipping chicken noodle soup and munching half a bagel with grape jelly. The girl is one of about 100 students who transferred this school year from a nearby public school that was closed; Johnson can't understand why she hasn't been screened for reading disabilities. The girl doesn't even recognize the word "moon." She is reading only at a first-grade level. Johnson has her practice reading aloud mostly common words.

"She tries so hard," Johnson says, noting the girl participates in an after-school program. "She has nobody at home to help her in the evening. We're doing whole-word work because she hasn't learned any of these decoding skills."

She worries that if the girl isn't able to crack the code, she will end up getting pregnant and leaving school. "We pay now, or we pay later," for students like her, she says.

The transfer students concern Johnson and her staff. The school has worked so hard to teach students how to read and do math, and the results show – Dallas Nicholas was only a few children away from beating state averages last school year. And now they must contend with this new subset of students whose school hadn't made the progress Dallas Nicholas has.

After lunch, Johnson continues her patrol of the classrooms. She saves her paperwork until the school bell rings at 2:40 p.m. The bulletin boards stretching along the hallways are decorated with student work, as are many of the classrooms. "My point of view about my little sisters is I don't like them because EVERY time I tell them to do something, they don't listen," reads one plaintive essay.

Teachers seem to love the school. Johnson's classroom observations can be nerve-wracking, the newer teachers say, but her suggestions are helpful. The principal also teaches a Penn Literacy Network class on language strategies once a week that 20 of the staff attend and receive credit for from the University of Pennsylvania. The community association for the school's neighborhood is paying for the teachers' tuition.

Mary Catherine Zervos, who once worked in private schools and abroad, including Japan, has nothing but praise for Johnson. She says she struggled when she first joined the faculty, and Johnson offered support, sending her to workshops, suggesting techniques, and allowing her to go to other schools to watch master teachers in action.

"We are a learning community," Zervos says, who is staying after school today to help a student who is struggling with writing and spelling. Many teachers stay after school, either working in an after-school program aimed mainly at the transfer students or providing extra help on their own.

On the other end of the experience spectrum, veterans like Cynthia Hebron, who has 30 years under her belt, 20 at Dallas Nicholas, finds Johnson's leadership helpful as well. "She is supportive — getting us to see other schools. She's real data-oriented," Hebron says, citing the daily planning meetings as another example of encouraging teachers to develop professionally.

Melissa Martin is a young teacher who came to the school after working at Sylvan Learning Systems. At first she was intimidated by some of the rules, such as posting the standards.

"Now I understand why. It seems to me the job is to have the children do the best possible," she says. "We're one united front. Everybody works together as a team. Not for the benefit of the team – we want to have children reading at a first grade level."

"We're one united front. Everybody works together as a team. We want to have children reading at a first grade level."

Melissa Martin, *Teacher*

But the staff has to work hard and although it is showing signs of success, some areas need improvement. The staff does home visits in the evenings when they find it necessary – such as when parents don't have phones, Johnson says. She'll find herself holding impromptu parent conferences on the sidewalk when parents walk to the school to pick up their children. But she admits that one of the areas the school needs to improve is parent participation. It's one of the school's goals this year. It did see an increase in PTA participation last year – up to 53 parents last year. While overall attendance is good, the school is targeting students with 20 or more absences. It also is working on discipline – it saw a surge in office referrals and suspensions last year and wants to reduce the numbers in this one.

Another place where the school is lacking, Johnson says, is in technology. It recently received a grant to replace its ancient machines. One is 15 years old. The school secretary, Johnson observes dryly, has become expert at stripping a junk computer for parts.

Johnson reiterates her take on the school's theme: "Teaching and learning must take place every day, every minute of the day."

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Searching for a SUPERHERO: Can Principals Do It All?

Principals hold the key to change. But should they wield power or empower others to lead?

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