



Best Practices in Action

Nine principals share their successful strategies for school leadership.

By H.J. Cummins

We all remember the teachers who inspired us. But what about the people who inspired them? As school districts across the country double down to improve education, more than a decade of research points to the critical role of principals in inspiring the kind of change that lifts teaching and learning.

The starting point for that research is this: Inside the school building, leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student success, according to the landmark study, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. What's crucial is that a strong leader pulls together all the important variables into a critical mass. Think of principals as ringmasters, organizing the whole show so their

talented troupes can deliver their best performances.

So, how do principals pull it off? A 2013 publication, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, identifies five effective practices, from shaping a vision for the school to managing resources well. This Wallace Foundation report was based on what the foundation has learned about princi-



SHAPING A VISION OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Effective principals make clear the school is committed to high standards and success for every child.

Principal Zachary Rahn stepped into Ashley Elementary School, a “red” (failing) school in Denver in June 2013. Faith in its education was so low that the families of one-third of the neighborhood students were choosing to send them elsewhere; it had the highest opt-out rate among Denver’s public schools.

Rahn started to address the issue by crafting a vision of a strong neighborhood school: “Ashley Elementary School provides all students with a rigorous curriculum while nurturing the confidence and character needed to succeed in the 21st century, positively impacting our community through excellence in thought and action.”

To help his teachers see that vision in action, Rahn spent part of a \$100,000 grant to send them to observe the high-standards cultures of strong schools. At the same time, Rahn and his teachers created pamphlets and DVDs that captured their vision of excellence for all. Then, they delivered the materials and their pitch to the parents of those many neighborhood children not enrolled at Ashley Elementary.

There are signs of success. Once projected to go down in enrollment, the pre-K-5 school instead added a third preschool and a third kindergarten class this past fall. “It’s going to be great,” Rahn said.

Principal Thomas DeGrazia’s vision for P.S. 66 in the Bronx, New York,

pals in more than a decade of work to boost school leadership, an effort that included projects in 24 states and the publication of more than 70 articles and research, including *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*.

To showcase these five practices, the Wallace Foundation recently asked nine elementary school principals for examples from their own experiences. The nine principals

are part of a professional learning community managed by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement, which is part of the foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative to help six school districts develop large pools of effective principals. Most come from challenging schools with much diversity and many low-income students. Here are their stories.

might be described as a school that gives each child what he or she needs to succeed. The pre-K-5 school has the disadvantaged demographics that can overwhelm learning: 97 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, 75 percent are non-native English speakers, and many families live in temporary housing. “My view is we’re only as strong as our weakest link,” DeGrazia said. “I think a school is judged academically as well as morally by how well our most vulnerable students do.”

At the core of DeGrazia’s academic regimen is an individual, holistic action plan for each child. The year begins with initial evaluations. Then all students are assessed every four to six weeks by their teachers and social workers, speech therapists, or other support professionals. With that level of frequent monitoring, the school leads students toward the goal of advancing at least one academic year each school year—or 1.5 years for those who begin below grade level. “We don’t want to do post-mortems; we want to make corrections,” DeGrazia said.

The approach helps the school rank regularly in the top 20 percent in the city in terms of advancement among the lowest students, he said. And DeGrazia plans to do more. His next goal is to use grants to bring community services into the school, including medical care to help students with asthma.



CREATING A CLIMATE HOSPITABLE TO EDUCATION

Through everything from ensuring orderliness to making teachers feel they are part of a community of professionals, great school leaders ensure all people in the school can focus on learning.

At Berkeley Lake Elementary School in suburban Atlanta’s Gwinnett County, principal Susan Bearse makes her teachers a priority. After Bearse came to the K-5 school in 2012, she set up a professional learning room. “You have to create the environment because it just doesn’t happen without a space,” she said. She also built instructional training into the school day (and provided substitutes so teachers could attend), and she set aside 45 minutes of grade-level collaboration for teachers each day.

A new writer’s academy brought many of her efforts together. In Georgia, all fifth graders have to pass a writing test to advance, so her fifth-grade teachers collaborated to create Saturday writing classes for their students. Recognizing that mastering writing is a years-long process, the teachers then shared their Saturday teaching strategies with their peers in the lower grades. All that professional collaboration helped lead to 42 percent of the students exceeding the state standard, a 12 percent increase over the 2012-2013 school year.

In Brooklyn, New York, P.S. 206 principal Deirdre Keyes had her pre-K-8 school completely repainted in primary colors, including what she described as “Elmo pink” and “school bus yellow.”

“It tells the children this is their place where they can feel comfortable and happy,” Keyes said. One sign her “climate” appeals to students: The school’s attendance rate exceeds 96 percent.

Nearby at P.S. 66, DeGrazia applies several strategies to promote a healthy learning environment. One is “DeGrazia dollars”—students can earn \$1, \$5, or \$10 by listening intently to teachers, helping other students, or turning something into the lost and found, for example. \$100 buys a bicycle in the school store. It’s rewards, not rebukes, that motivate, believes the man whose name is on the money.



CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP IN OTHERS

Students perform better on math and reading tests in schools that show good leadership at all levels—including principals, teachers, and staff.

Leaders need to see the big picture. For teachers, that means looking outside their own classrooms, grade levels, and even schools, said Kristin Tonelli, principal at Lewis Elementary School, a pre-K-5 school in Hillsborough County, Florida, which encompasses Tampa. To that end, each grade level at Lewis Elementary sends one teacher to a monthly, schoolwide, problem-solving leadership committee to deliver student achievement data from every classroom in that grade level, discuss it with teachers representing the rest of the school, and compare it with other schools in the district. “For teachers that can be scary, to take on that leadership role. But it helps them start thinking bigger,” Tonelli said.

Cultivating future principals is another part of the job, said veteran principal Gina O’Hare, who last fall opened the new K-5 Palisades Park Elementary School in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) school district. Like her mentors before her, O’Hare includes her assistant prin-

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✦ **The Principal Story Learning Guide** is a free, online resource featuring interactive units with activities based on each of the five key practices of effective principals.

✦ In *Great School Leadership in Action*, a series of free videos produced in 2012, principals from five different school districts **reflect on techniques that have worked** for them.

✦ The full report, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, is available for free.

cipals in all decisions that arise over the year—from handling instruction and budgets to dealing with low-performing teachers. “I want them to experience everything a principal does so they’ll be ready,” she said.

The culture of leadership at Arcadio Elementary School in Gwinnett County (Georgia) extends to students, too, said principal Penny Palmer Young. The K-5 school, with nearly 1,200 students, operates according to *The 7 Habits of Happy Children* by Sean Covey. It’s serious work. “Still, there’s nothing cuter than a 5-year-old talking about how he or she is being ‘proactive,’ or saying, ‘I am seeking first to understand, and then be understood,’” said Young.



IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

Effective principals focus relentlessly on the quality of instruction.

At P.S. 154, in Queens, New York, principal Tara Davidson turned to visual clues to help her teachers infuse instruction with the rigorous requirements of the Common Core State Standards. Early on, she asked each teacher in the pre-K-5 school to take colorful highlighters to all their lesson plans and mark those that met specific Common Core requirements. “A missing color meant a missing requirement, and then the teachers at each grade level were to get together to fill any gaps,” Davidson said.

In another exercise, Davidson had her teachers write questions appropriate for their students around a particular book. Then, Davidson cut them up, spread them across a table, and asked the teachers to pick the questions that they judged would fit each grade level. One result: Some teachers placed pre-K questions as high as the fifth grade. “We realized we had very different expectations across the building,” she said. “If pre-K teachers were telling us their kids could answer those questions,

we had to start checking our teaching.”

As part of Common Core implementation at the Mary Harris “Mother” Jones school in Prince George’s County, Maryland, outside of Washington, D.C., all the teachers planned their lessons for this year around four themes that they collectively set: change, cause and effect, systems, and patterns. For example, one sixth-grade teacher told principal Niki Brown that he wanted to teach black history. That’s fine, Brown told him, but he had to connect it to a theme—change, maybe, or historic patterns.

The themes are part of Brown’s strategy to blend learning across the pre-K-6 school’s subject areas and grade levels. This interdisciplinary approach trains students to think beyond book reports in reading class and tests in social studies class to building ideas based on all their lessons. “I tell my teachers, ‘We’re creating little dissertation writers,’” she said.



MANAGING PEOPLE, DATA, AND PROCESSES

Effective principals make good use of the resources at hand. They are good managers.

O’Hare, in North Carolina, counts among her core principles the idea that teachers need to be treated like professionals. “If there’s a conference they want to go to and they’re effective teachers, I’ll approve that—and I’ll ask them to put on professional development for other teachers,” she said.

Tonelli, at Lewis Elementary, parses all the numbers available to her to examine the learning strategies in her classrooms. If grade-level testing shows a low score in one area, teachers collectively adjust the curriculum. If the slump appears mostly in one class, a school leader, or sometimes a fellow teacher, steps in to provide coaching.

Teachers track numbers on individual students to respond to their needs. Tonelli told of one teacher who, after

examining students’ scores on a major test, created individualized homework packets based on the questions where that student scored poorly. “The amount of time it takes for a teacher to do this is huge,” she said.

Another number shows success at Lewis Elementary: One. That’s how many teachers transferred to another school this spring. “When you can bring back 99 percent of your staff, that helps you build so much collaboration,” Tonelli said. “You have to have all your classrooms and committees running efficiently and focused on one thing, and that is the achievement of students. School improvement is not a one-man—or one-woman—show,” she said.

Still, the catalyzing role of one person—an adept principal—can make a big difference in school quality. By skillfully carrying out the five practices described in this article, school leaders can enable their teachers to shine—and their students to reap the benefits. **P**

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