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Successful School Leadership in High Poverty Schools:  
An Examination of Three Urban Elementary Schools

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## ABSTRACT

In an age of accountability that requires ‘No Child Left Behind’, it is imperative that educators and policymakers learn more about the practices employed by school leaders who have improved the educational life chances of youngsters, especially those from high need urban schools that have traditionally been at greatest risk for academic failure.

This study examined three urban elementary schools serving high poverty communities that have shown improved student achievement scores during the tenure of the current principal. The focus of these case studies was to identify and examine the practices of these school leaders (an African American woman in each case) that contributed to improved student performance.

The case study methodology employed used state data to identify schools with improved student achievement scores and then a multi-perspective interview protocol to triangulate the perceptions of administrators, teachers, support staff, parent and students at each site to better understand how the principal contributed to the school’s success.

The cases revealed that in addition to the core set of basic skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2003) contend are necessary, but not sufficient, for school success in almost any context, these three principals responded to the challenging circumstances of their high poverty communities by establishing safe, nurturing environments for children and adults; setting high expectations for student performance, and holding everyone - students, faculty, parents and themselves - accountable for meeting those high expectations. Although markedly different in their individual approaches to leadership, all three women were able to set a clear direction for their school and then influenced members of the school community to begin moving in that direction, in great measure by modeling the behaviors and practices they desired.

Findings from these case studies are used to make recommendations for strengthening administrator preparation and practice, especially as it pertains to high poverty urban schools, as well as to draw implications for future research in this vital area.

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## SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN HIGH POVERTY SCHOOLS

### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

- Principals exert a measurable, though indirect, influence on student achievement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).
- High quality leadership is especially important in schools serving low socio-economic youngsters (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997).
- In aggregate, leadership effects account for about 5% of the overall variation in pupil test scores, yet this represents almost 25% of all in-school variables over which educational policy-makers have some control (Hallinger & Heck, 1996).

### WHY STUDY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP NOW?

- With increased public demand to hold schools accountable for student achievement, measurable performance - based outcomes are critical (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).
- With environmental and organizational contexts becoming increasingly complex, schools cannot rely on standard procedures and past practices, therefore, leadership is critical.
- If high quality leadership is perceived to be in short supply, understanding the practices of successful leaders is critical.

### INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY

- School leaders confront four, sometimes incompatible, aspects of accountability (Leithwood & Earl, 2000):

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Market approaches require creating and sustaining schools that can successfully compete for students.

Decentralization approaches require empowering stakeholders to seek a greater “voice” in decision-making.

Professional approaches require instructional leadership and meaningful assessments.

Management approaches require leaders to develop and execute strategic plans that link school means and ends.

#### INCREASING DEMOGRAPHIC COMPLEXITY

- Almost two-thirds (64)% of all foreign-born U.S. residents arrived since 1980, most coming from non-English speaking Asian and Central and South American nations. (Spring, 2004)
- Between 1990-2050, the % Hispanic in the U.S. population is predicted to increase from 9% to 25%, Asian from 3% to 8%, Black from 12% to 14%, while the % White is predicted to decline from 76% to 53%. (U.S. Census data, in Spring 2004)
- In 2002, 15% of all children 5-17 years old lived in households with an annual income below the poverty level, the figure is double that (29%) in central cities. (NCES, 2003)

#### INCREASING ORGANIZATIONAL COMPLEXITY

- Efforts to increase teacher empowerment.
- Attempts to flatten the governance hierarchy to permit greater SBM and parent and community involvement in SDM.
- A need to better utilize emergent information and communication technologies.
- When organizations become more complex and less stable (‘frontier cultures’), strong

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formal leadership is sought to re-establish coherence, direction and stability. Principals are typically assigned this role in education.

#### A PERCEIVED SHORTAGE IN SCHOOL LEADERS

- Principals are older and more experienced than in the past.
- The average age of principals increased from 46 to 50 years between 1987-2000, with the greatest concentration currently between ages 46-55 as opposed to 40-45 a decade earlier (Gates, Ringel, & Santibanez, 2003).
- In 1987, 38% of all principals were under age 40, but in 2000, only 12% were that young, yet just 17% are over 55 years.
- Principals are retiring after relatively short incumbencies (9 years on average).
- Compressed incumbencies increase administrator turnover.
- In New York, there are sufficient numbers of individuals certified to be school administrators. (Papa, Lankford & Wyckoff, 2002), but many have never applied for an administrative position, and many others have applied repeatedly but have not received a job offer. (Lankford, O'Connell & Wyckoff, 2003).
- “Existing data reveal no evidence of a national crisis in the labor market for school administrators” (RAND, 2003 p.1).
- Knapp & Copland (2003) examined 83 districts and found some attracted 40 or so candidates per principal opening, yet others nearby (with lower salaries and more poor and minority students) drew as few as three. They found similar but less extreme differences in Philadelphia public schools.

#### FOUR 'BIG' IDEAS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

- Leadership has two functions: providing purpose and direction, and exercising

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influence.

- Leadership requires social relationships and serves social ends.
- Leadership is contextual and contingent. (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a; Leithwood & Duke, 1999).
- Leadership is a function that can be distributed.

## CORE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

– Necessary, but insufficient, skills for success in almost all school contexts:

Setting directions: (shared purposes and goals)

- Identifying and articulating a vision.
- Creating high performance expectations for staff. (professional norms)
- Communication processes are crucial. (written, oral, symbolic)

Developing people: (building human capacity)

- Offering intellectual stimulation; (challenging ideas)
- Providing individualized support; (material and psychic)
- Providing an appropriate model. (leading by example)

Redesigning the organization: (creating opportunities for institutional growth)

- Strengthening school cultures;
- Modifying organizational structures;
- Building collaborative processes.

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## RESEARCH METHODS, PROCEDURES AND DATA SOURCES

- Three cases were developed using quantitative and qualitative data sources.
- Quantitative data were obtained from SED report cards to identify high need schools with improved student achievement scores during the tenure of the principal.
- Qualitative sources included interviews with the principal, 20% of teachers and 20% of support staff randomly selected at each school from among those who agreed to be interviewed.
- Focus group interviews were conducted with at least 2 groups of parents (typically 3-5 parents per group) and 2 groups of students (3-5 students per group). These groups can more appropriately be described as opportunity rather than random samples.
- The semi-structured interview protocol was developed originally for the International Successful School Leadership Project from a review of the literature on school leadership. Similar, though appropriately modified, protocols were used to interview each of the five different categories of respondents.

## LIMITATIONS

- Small number of cases.
- Not necessarily transferable to other contexts.

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CASE STUDY SITES (Pseudonyms are used in place of the real names of schools).

CASE STUDY #1 – COSTELLO

Table 1 - Costello / District Comparisons

PreK - 5	School	District
Enrollment	857	8,640
Demographics (%)	(%)	(%)
Caucasian	30	58
African American	56	35
Hispanic	5	2
Native Amer., Asian, Pacific Islander	9	5
Average Class Size	19	20
Free or Reduced Lunch (%)	81	54

Data taken from New York State Education Department's 2002-2003 State Report Cards

The principal is an African-American woman who was a Registered Nurse before earning a Masters degree in educational administration. She's had 35 years in public education, 12 years as an administrator, 8 years as a principal, all at Costello.

There are 56 teachers and 6 support staff.

Table 2 – Costello and Similar schools 4<sup>th</sup> grade ELA & Math scores (1998/99 – 2002/03)

4th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Costello		Similar Schools		Costello		Similar Schools	
Year	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	51	49	69	31	33	67	47	52
99-00	40	70	53	47	32	67	43	57
00-01	42	58	47	53	31	69	36	64
01-02	32	69	44	56	36	63	36	64
02-03	45	55	40	60	31	69	24	77

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CASE STUDY #2 - HAMILTON

Table 3 - Hamilton / District Comparisons

PreK – 8	School	District
Enrollment	353	41,625
Demographics (%)	(%)	(%)
Caucasian	1	27
African American	98	58
Hispanic	1	12
Native Amer., Asian, Pacific Islander	0	3
Average Class Size	17	21
Free or Reduced Lunch (%)	100	74

Data taken from New York State Education Department’s 2002-2003 State Report Cards

The principal is an African-American woman who has a Masters degree in counseling education and a Masters in educational administration. She’s spent 14 years in education, but just 4 years as a principal, all at Hamilton.

There are 36 teachers and 4 support staff.

Table 4 - Hamilton 4<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA & Math scores  
(1998/99 – 2002/03)

4th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Hamilton		Similar Schools		Hamilton		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	45	56	74	26	36	64	52	49
99-00	88	12	63	37	76	24	56	44
00-01	71	30	65	35	55	45	57	42
01-02	67	33	63	37	50	50	60	40
02-03	65	35	62	38	38	63	44	56
8th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Hamilton		Similar Schools		Hamilton		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	92	8	74	26	91	8	84	17
99-00	100	0	84	16	94	6	86	14
00-01	87	13	79	20	96	4	85	15
01-02	89	11	85	15	94	5	81	20
02-03	80	20	81	18	55	44	68	32

CASE STUDY #3 – FRASER

Table 5 – Fraser / District Comparisons

K – 8	School	District
Enrollment	519	41,625
Demographics (%)	(%)	(%)
Caucasian	1	27
African American	97	58
Hispanic	1	12
Native Amer., Asian, Pacific Islander	1	3
Average Class Size	23	21
Percent Free or Reduced Lunch (%)	83	74

Data taken from New York State Education Department’s 2002-2003 State Report Cards

The principal is an African-American woman who has a Masters degree in guidance and counseling and a Ph.D. in educational administration. She’s had a career of 38 years in education, 23 years as an administrator including exemplary service as a principal in another major U.S. city before become principal at Fraser 10 years ago.

There are 43 teachers and 3 support staff.

Table 6 – Fraser 4<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA & Math scores (1998/99 – 2002/03)

4th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Fraser		Similar Schools		Fraser		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
Year								
98-99	72	28	74	26	40	61	52	49
99-00	52	48	63	37	13	87	56	44
00-01	59	41	63	37	28	72	51	49
01-02	47	54	61	39	40	60	55	44
02-03	44	56	59	41	5	95	39	61
8th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Fraser		Similar Schools		Fraser		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
Year								
98-99	60	41	74	26	56	44	84	17
99-00	82	18	84	16	56	44	86	14
00-01	66	34	82	18	26	73	87	13
01-02	85	16	85	14	18	82	79	21
02-03	70	30	82	17	30	70	77	23

In 1994, Fraser’s district entered into a partnership with a regional bank to turn around an

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underperforming elementary school. Fraser was selected to be that school because at the time it was one of the lowest performing schools in the district. The bank agreed to contribute \$500,000<sup>i</sup> a year in supplemental funding for the school for eight years subject to several key conditions. First and foremost was that the bank, not the district, would hire a new principal. This principal would have more autonomy than most from district governance, operating with an independent management board consisting of a representative from the bank, the district superintendent and union representatives. Resources to refurbish the building were made available at the outset of the new principal's tenure, and the district promised to continue providing resources to Fraser in line with that spent on other schools. In other words, the bank money could be used to supplement, but supplant district support.

#### PRELIMINARY CASE STUDY FINDINGS

- Three key questions:

- 1) Is your school successful in meeting the needs of students?
- 2) How do you define success?
- 3) What factors have contributed to success?

#### Case #1 - Costello

- Interviews with the principal, two assistant principals, 8 teachers, 7 support staff and focus groups with parents and students.
- Respondents felt the school has been successfully meeting the needs of the students.
- High poverty kept the definition for success focused on growth in the emotional and social development of students, and to a lesser extent, on academic performance.

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My own personal definition of success is, we are successful if we take children from here and make forward progress and improvement in their attitude and their behavior and their academics, and they are continuously growing.

- Measures of success when described in academic terms are seen as steps towards functional literacy and the foundation for life-long learning:

Success, for me, is if when a child leaves here in fifth grade, they have the ability to function. What I mean by that is, if they read something and don't understand a word, they know to go to the dictionary. They know it's important to go to the dictionary so that you get the understanding. If you still don't grasp what's going on, it's important to know that you need to discuss it with somebody.

- Costello has a reputation for being a 'bad' school, but most feel it is a safe school that has made academic progress since the arrival of the current principal eight years ago.
- The principal is seen as the factor/individual contributing most to school success and starting to change Costello's negative reputation.
- Themes about the principals contributions: her high expectations for student performance; her deep concern for children; her belief that these children can and will learn; her insistence that students and adults, parents included, be held accountable for making this happen; also, she instilled discipline and order; and persisted in her efforts to introduce a new literacy program (America's Choice), even over the objects of some experienced teachers. Even her detractors voice grudging admiration for her tenaciousness.
- Illustrative quotes:

She brought order to the school; discipline to the school; high expectations for behavior, but academically, it was still just teachers doing what they wanted to do,

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not very high expectations for these kids as far as learning. When she brought that program in here (America's Choice), even though there was a high resistance she was able to push it through, ...and got the stakeholders to come on board. A lot of principals would have just said, "That's too much work", but she didn't. She didn't care, she knew it would be what's best for kids, and it has because it's brought consistency to the building. There are standards in place; there are expectations in place. Kids and teachers are doing it, and it's fantastic.

High expectations; that's the key factor, I think. The expectation that every student here can learn and every student will learn no matter what, that is what's made a tremendous difference. Before it wasn't like that, it wasn't always like that here. It changed because the people in leadership changed. It is just a fact that those expectations were not there and they are there now. When you come into this school, every child will be respected. Every child will be expected to learn and every person who is in the building will be expected to teach that child; not just the classroom teacher, but the custodian staff, the cafeteria, everybody has a part in that child's education.

I think that she has tried very hard to undo the bad publicity that the school has had. I think that she's also made teachers realize that they are accountable for what they produce at the end of the year or at the end of the day. I think that that's a positive change.

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Holding people accountable for their jobs. It's their jobs to teach and she expects them to teach. She expects the job to be done and it should be. It goes without saying; it should be done. You're being paid to do a job: you should do it. I think it encourages people to work harder.

We discipline with respect and dignity. That is something that the principal really stressed and she worked very hard to change when she came and she made changes. She slowly changed our way of disciplining students. We discipline with respect and dignity and we make that a student feel as though he is special and he is important and each student knows that. And that idea of respect and recognition is something that's crafted. That's a concept, prior to her coming, that we didn't do; many of us didn't do, I won't speak for everyone.

- The principal worked to create a nurturing environment, i.e., a safe haven from out-of-school dangers. She also made the building safer by buffering teachers from unwelcome intrusions from irate and unruly parents.

Safety and security has been a biggie with the principal. That reception area in the front hall; we never had that years ago. Teachers wanted it for years and no one seemed to be able to accomplish it. Finally she came and we got it. We keep the doors locked and people have to sign in and there's no one roaming the building; popping up in classrooms unannounced. It's been a real good thing. Staff members feel secure at work, especially in a building this size.

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She made it a point that we don't bother teachers unless we have to, don't call rooms unless we have to, because instruction is important to her. I would say that's the major thing that I've been involved with - the whole safety issue. It was for the safety of everybody.

- The principal has a very strong presence in the school and is supportive of people's needs:

She is the pulse beat of the school. She's here every day, she knows who's here, she knows who's not here; she sees you when you walk in that door in the morning. She makes sure the school is secure. You just know that everything is operating smoothly. She's an excellent leader. I believe she treats the school like it's her home. It's a beautiful school; it's well kept. Everything is furnished nicely and the hallways are always clean.

She remembers that she was a parent once, and she's a grandmother now. When parents come in, even with children with problems, I have yet to see a parent leave not feeling something has been resolved.

Case #2 – Hamilton

- Interviews with the principal, assistant principal, 11 teachers, 4 support staff, parents and students.
- Respondents view Hamilton as a school in the process of turning around from being a

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SURR school. Still too early to be called a successful school, but far enough along for people to recognize that headway is being made, especially in the early grades, in preparing teachers to prepare their students for state tests, and in attending to the needs of the “whole” child:

We were at zero. That was the good thing. We only had one way to go, nowhere to go but up. But we still have a long ways to go, which is so frustrating. But we think the improvement is there. The improvement is there.

The administration has done a very good job identifying the needs of students, especially in the educational and emotional aspect. They’ve been able to identify target populations that are having difficulty with reading and math scores and they’ve implemented different teaching strategies and learning strategies to help the students with their reading and math scores.

- Being a SURR school has focused everyone’s attention on improving achievement, as per the Principal’s stated objective that, “Everything leads back to student achievement.”

If the purpose of the school is to learn, then that’s what has to happen. So you have to facilitate that for children. I think it’s all about success. I think it’s about experiencing it, believing that I can learn even though for the last seven or eight years I might have been told, whether it was verbally or non-verbally that I couldn’t, and so I didn’t...we told them every single day, this is a school for success. It is not a school for failure, that if you do not want to work, this is not where you need to be.

We’re getting kids more motivated each year to learn so there’s more kids who want to learn, which is nice to see. I guess with the test scores improving, the kids feel

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better. Even if I still feel like I don't do enough teaching the way I want to, they feel more confident, they see the increase and they want to learn harder.

- A few define “success” in broader terms – such as personal satisfaction, the school’s familial atmosphere and parental support, and basic needs for safety and emotional security of children:

Since I’ve been here, I’ve seen improved behavior, I’ve seen kids who... have some self-respect, some dignity, some pride, trying harder. To me it doesn’t really matter if you pass the New York State test but if you’re trying, that says a whole lot about you. And I’ve seen increases in that, so I think it’s meeting their needs that way.

- The fundamental factor contributing to improvements in the school was the attitude and values the principal and assistant principal brought four years earlier:

She came in and she had a program. She knows what she wants. She has a very good vision for this school. It’s a happy, healthy vision for the school and for the kids—it’s not a self-serving vision. You won’t ever see her on the news. She is selfless.

When she came here, she had a plan. She had ideas, or at least it sure looked that way. And she let us know that this is the way it’s going to be done and it’ll work. And it worked. It did work. And we backed her up and she backed us up. She stands there for us. And I think that that was it. It was a firm “we’re going to make this work and it will.”

- The principal is seen as being the most significant individual in changing the expectations of student performance and behavior. She won’t allow teachers or students to use a deficit model of social capital to rationalize poor academic achievement or

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antisocial behavior.

Her statement is, this is not a school where you may fail and she reiterates that; she will take kids who are not performing—their assignments are not in—and she will sit with them after school. This is called putting your money where your mouth is. And that has a good affect.

I think the biggest thing is that we have student expectations. We had very poor language skills and we were told never to correct the children before and she expects you to. That has come from her. She expects us to do it.

I think she's responsible, she's our leader here; she's our principal. Because she's trying everything that she can do and is open to new ideas, it makes us push harder too. We want this school and our kids to be successful. We want them to learn; we want them to be able to compete out there in this world. We want all of that, don't we? I know I do. I know other teachers that do. And I think the principal is the catalyst here.

I've been through a lot of administrators in thirty years and she is the best administrator I have had. She is concerned, she is open to people talking, she is open to ideas and she never raises her voice, which is highly unusual.

- She created a safe, nurturing environment for children:

Her first step here was creating a safe environment for the children; a place they could go to where there was no chaos, in the halls, in the auditorium, in the lunchroom, in the library. I think that's why she has her walks through the building

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with the Assistant Principal and the coordinator; to keep things under control—to make sure the children know she's around keeping an eye on them. Once she established control of the building, she started working on the academics and it just fell into place. I am very happy being here.

- She established clear rules and procedures, and consequences for non-compliance.

Our principal is very clear in what she expects and that makes her a good leader.

Right down from our lesson plans to what she expects of you in our classroom, we know our expectations. There's no second-guessing what you're supposed to be doing or what you should do. And if you're not meeting expectations, then help is there. If there's something you don't know about or need help with, you can go to her and if she doesn't know, she'll find the support that does. I think that makes her a good leader.

She has a way about her that even if you're in there to get your hand slapped, it ends on a positive note. We talk about the problems, whatever the problem may be and always praise and try to build collegiality throughout. It is tough, but this is her baby, don't dare hurt her baby. It's like a mother with a child. People respect her. They know she's demanding, but in a fair way. She knows how to get what she wants without intimidating anyone.

She likes us being happy at our jobs.... The morale is important—that the kids succeed. She doesn't want one failure. She stresses that all the time to the teachers and the kids. She doesn't want to see any failures, there's no reason for it. She wants

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to see the school be a success. She wants to see the kids be successful, see the kids be something.

- She recognized that to succeed, teachers and support staff needed professional development opportunities and time to plan. Teachers needed a greater repertoire of skills to reach their students.

We do vertical and horizontal planning. We have 5-8 meeting now.

We've been trained to look at statistics and learning all types of different techniques to improve the school.

We're becoming successful at teaching to the tests and getting the test grades up.

Eighth grade math alone, I think we had three points the year before last, and last year we went up to forty-some. So we increased quite a bit. Still below average, but we jumped more than others jumped, so I think we're getting successful in learning how to teach for the test.

They raised the bar and they looked at different ways of encouraging teachers and brought in new teachers. They brought in new teachers, they got rid of some teachers that weren't willing to change and go with the new things. They came in and if the kids didn't know their math facts, they brought them into the office and did math facts with them during lunch or after school.

She's empowered teachers to try new things, to work what you can, work with what you have. She's willing to let you try things. She tried new initiatives, but as far as I

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know and can see that she will research it or look into it to see if it is going to be the best for the school—if it's best suited for the school—because not every initiative is.

She's brought different reading programs into here. A lot of focus has been on reading. She's brought in different reading programs for the kids to be able to have books, be able to take books home.

If we want to try something out in a classroom we could talk to (the principal) about it. She loves the idea of trying different activities or trying new ways to reach the kids.

- The school's declining enrollment has resulted in smaller class sizes – a factor that may have contributed to improved test scores:

We're running about eighteen, average, .... So everybody knows the kids very well. Particularly if they're in eighth grade, we've had them for two years. I've had them for four years and you know them very well. And fortunately this year everybody is returning—teachers—so nobody can slide by as easily as they could last year.

Now, any child who wants extra help, it's available and we try to get to parents.

We're trying to educate parents about how you take advantage of this. Especially in the younger grades, you don't want them to get behind.

- Many mentioned that the principal had earned their respect because she led by example: You can't ask people to do things that you're not willing to do yourself. If you're not willing to stay after and come in on Saturday and if you're not willing to sit in the office and help a kid who's after school, then don't ask anyone else to do it. Those

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things have happened. Leading by example is the biggest thing that's made a difference. She's going to stand out on the street corner with everybody else in the rain to make sure the kids all get outside. I think if you honestly look at it, it's made all the difference in the world.

The fact that she makes herself available to talk to parents—it could be early in the morning or very late in the day when you can tell she's tired and had a long day, she still will take that time to come on in. And the fact that you take time with me, then whatever it is that I have that's going on is important to you, even at the end of your long day, makes a big difference for a parent and they're more willing when that child has a problem or they're not doing what they're supposed to do, that parent is going to go the extra mile because the principal went the extra mile.

- External factors include the support and contribution of parents, social agencies and others in the community that help with after-school and out of school experiences:

We have a family math program where the parents come in, and it actually turned out to be a fun thing, where the parents came in and enjoyed going through these learning stations with their kids, it sort of encourages the parents to come and get involved.

I think that the most effective changes have really grown out of the community ... like the property owner's association being in contact with the law enforcement community to make sure that the streets are safer for the kids to get to school. ... Because it is a neighborhood school, what happens out there is going to come in here.

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A group of neighbors are working together trying to save the neighborhood. Last year they gave us a thousand dollars to use towards the school.

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Case #3 - Fraser

- Interviews with the principal, her program coordinator (analogous to a teacher serving as an assistant principal), 12 teachers, 6 support staff, as well as focus groups with parents and students.
- Respondents were unequivocal in their belief that Fraser is successfully meeting the needs of students, and to a person they attribute the school's success primarily to the principal and the high expectations she holds for the children, staff and parents.

This is not a place for reluctant bodies [to] disappear in some little corner of the world and do your little job. It doesn't work that way because we're always interacting with each other for the sake of the children. Let's say I was a reluctant teacher. The pressure of seeing your peers working is going to get to you. The pressure of having your supervisor saying, "Hey. You know, what's going on?" and you have nothing to contribute, it's going to get to you. So, this is not the environment for someone who just wants to lay back.

You know, seven years ago, I was very, very autocratic, very independent, seeing my job as very isolated. And through the seven years, I've kind of matured into being an inclusion person and that I'm not frantic about things. So, I have to reflect and say, in (the principal's) mentoring, [that I have learned] to share and understand the value of sharing your professional skills, but to bring integrity to it, to bring respect into it, to bring humor into it, and to always be willing to listen.

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I've grown so much under her it's hard for me to express how much she's done for me. She always told us to push our kids, and now, as I reflect, ... also pushed us, as the teachers.

I think the vision that [the principal] personifies comes down through the staff and

I think because her standards are so high, it makes our standards also so high. ...

And I think, with children as our priority and looking at each child as an individual in our classrooms and not so much as grouping them all the time, makes such a difference in what we do here.

- Fraser's faculty is currently 60% white, 35% black and 5% other. As recently as 1994 the faculty was 95% white.

- When defining success, three major themes emerge: the school context, students' emotional growth and academic growth:

- Context: the fact that kids are coming to school and participating now that Fraser is a safe learning environment.

a home away from home. We have to literally make the kids go home when they're dismissed and we start at 8 a.m. Technically, the school is what's called an "early school" and we're out at 2:30 p.m., but there's an after-school program and an after-after... So, it's like 5 p.m., which is a long day.

- Emotional growth - students feeling they can become better people; feeling successful; they are happy.

- Aspects of the principal's work that contribute to the school's success: She advocates for children – always placing their needs first; her open door policy and approachability; she is a regular and positive presence throughout the school (whether in corridors,

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classrooms or with parents), as well as in the surrounding community; she treats people fairly especially with regard to distributing needed resources.

She's impacted directly on my area because I have complete and total flexibility as to the program, what I want to run, what I want to do, how I want to conduct it. That's what I appreciate. As long as you're working for the children, she'll make sure that everything is taken care of.

When we prepare for the testing, [the principal] meets with us frequently to talk about what the profile of the class is, what we think we're going to need to have them be the most successful. Do we have everything that is necessary? Do we need more coverage, more meeting time after school, whatever there is? So, there's always that involvement. You're never left out there hanging.

- The school culture is now one in which faculty and administration work together, there is good two-way communication; there is support, collegiality and cooperation; the school has a warm, positive environment. The word 'family' was used often to describe the prevailing ethos in the school, with the principal as the 'mother hen' and teachers and parents not wanting to disappoint her.

She tells you what she expects and she lets you do it. And she also lets you know when you're not doing it, and it's done in a non-threatening way. She's very supportive. ... And I have never ever, worked with anyone of her caliber.

- The faculty has high expectations for students (most noting that they see this modeled by the principal).

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I would say is the more she learns, the more we do. She goes to meetings and finds out things we need to do ... . When she came here, she implemented a lot of things they did in Chicago. And by the time the district caught up to it, we already did it.

- There is a very high level of parental and community involvement and support which is attributed to the efforts of the principal.

She's straight up with the parents, and she's very supportive of them as parents. I know the parents know that she has their children's best interest at heart. They cooperate. They cooperate because they know what she's doing and she's made so many changes. So, they're on her side.

She has parent involvement committees within our building. She's established a Parent Patrol, where parents are outside our building in the morning and outside after school making sure that the children, you know, are safe on the playground, and off the playground, and off the schoolyard. We have parent involvement in the building where parents will also come in and work during the day as volunteers just to sit at the desk by the front door and, as people come in, have them sign-in, whatever.

- The level of financial support from the bank partner has allowed professional development to become a cornerstone of practice. Teachers noted the wealth of in-service opportunities and on-going faculty capacity building makes them feel equipped to work with the school's population.

- The legend of her shoes:

She kicked off her shoes, I mean seriously kicked off her little heels, put her little flats on and said, "Let's go," jumped in her Mercedes Benz rolled down the street the wrong way because it was closer. She took care of business, came on back,

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and continued on.

## CONCLUSIONS

- All 3 have to confront issues of accountability, especially professional approaches in Hamilton, where the principal has even had to go back into the classroom to address 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores. Fraser was able to utilize the principal's prior knowledge and bank support to build professional accountability through on-going staff development. At Costello, it began to be realized after the forced introduction of the America's Choice literacy program. Because of its relationship with a bank partner, Fraser is the only one of the 3 schools that confronts market accountability, especially now that it has become a public charter school. Fraser is also the most mature in its involvement of parents and community when addressing decentralization accountability. Costello has been least successful in this regard do to an adversarial union and what is seen by some as a rather authoritarian style on the part of the principal. In Hamilton, decentralization has not yet truly emerged. Fraser's principal used her prior experience to develop a very explicit management approach, one modeled closely by her former mentee, the principal at Hamilton who is still in the early stages of implementation. The principal at Costello has also borrowed ideas from Fraser's principal, but with less success due to the size and diversity of her school, and her own more intimidating style.

- All 3 have exhibited the core characteristics of successful leadership but to a varying extent, with the principal at Fraser being far and away the most competent of the three at setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organization. That said, all three have attempted to address all three of the subsets of each core skill. What separates their

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efforts from just being baseline skills can be captured by their attention to the interrelatedness of three of the subheadings, one from each skill set:

- Creating high performance expectations for everyone - All three will not allow the impoverished conditions of their students to be used as an excuse for failure. They will not blame the victim nor let anyone else. They recognize the problem but genuinely believe that with the commitment of teachers, staff and parents, as well as the students themselves, these children CAN and WILL succeed. This attitude sets a standard for professional behavior and establishes the school's professional norms.
- Providing an appropriate model - When it comes to developing people and building the human capacity for a school, leading by example is a very powerful tool. For each of these principals, their work is their passion and their mission. It is never simply a day at the office. And the way they conduct their work is always on public display. They do not hide in their office, they do not make unreasonable demands and they never make demands of others that they wouldn't do themselves. Even in the case of Costello's principal, who has her detractors, there is recognition and admiration of her determination.
- Strengthening school cultures – Strengthening a school's culture requires time, especially if it requires first "reculturing" a school from past failure and negative public perceptions. At Hamilton, we see a school culture in transition. The effects of improvement are starting to reinforce the principal's mission. The faculty now trust her and believe that the direction she set and plan she develop can succeed, so they are willing to follow on. Costello is also undergoing a period of cultural transition, as most see the benefits of the literacy program, while others still chafe under the fact that it was imposed, yet fully recognizing that it has made a difference. Some teacher do not trust

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the principal to take their ideas into consideration during decision making and some parents are intimidated by a principal who holds them accountable for their youngsters performance. Fraser is a school with a culture that has been transformed by the efforts of the principal. Parents are buying homes and moving into the community to get their children into the school. Teachers who resonate with the principal's efforts are seeking transfers in to the school (while there are some who are looking to leave in light of the move towards charter status). People trust this principal to continue in her efforts, but because she is seen so highly, there is a growing concern as to how the school will sustain after she retires in a few years.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREPARATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

These items will be discussed at the forum.

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