

a Mission of the Heart

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TRANSFORM A SCHOOL?

Insights Based on Interviews and Focus Groups with Principals and Superintendents from High-Needs Districts



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WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TRANSFORM A SCHOOL?

In politics, business, even in war, bringing in new leadership is a time-tested way to fuel change. Today communities across the country are looking to school principals and superintendents to transform troubled schools. Nearly half of the nation's school superintendents say that they have moved a successful principal into a low-performing school in an effort to turn it around. The vast majority of those who have done this say the principal was able to make genuine progress.¹

But what exactly does it take to transform a troubled school into one where students thrive? What do the leaders actually do? What kinds of skills do they need? Where should we be looking for leaders who have the right combination of talent and skills, and once we find them, how do we sustain and support them?

Most of the leaders fell into one of two distinct categories – they were either “transformers” or “copers.”

As part of the Wallace Foundation's long-term commitment to re-energizing and supporting effective leadership in the nation's districts and schools, the Foundation asked Public Agenda to conduct a small-scale study designed to listen carefully to principals who are currently working in high-needs schools and to leaders with

experience working with effective principals. Public Agenda has studied attitudes among schools leaders nationwide in a series of studies conducted with Wallace. It has also examined attitudes among teachers, parents, students and other key groups in education for nearly two decades. See www.wallacefoundation.org and www.publicagenda.org for more information.

Methodology

In summer and fall of 2007, Public Agenda completed five focus groups with principals in high-needs districts and sixteen one-on-one interviews with superintendents and other high-ranking education officials including a state superintendent of education. Principals included individuals who had completed traditional training programs in school administration, along with those completing special training and/or professional development through groups such as the New York City Leadership Academy, the Principal Leadership Institute of the University of California at Berkeley and the Wallace Foundation. All the principals held leadership positions supervising schools where more than half of students received free or reduced price lunch. A complete list of focus groups and individual interviews is on page 15. All interviews followed a systematic interview guide revolving around two broad questions: What makes an effective leader in a high-needs school, and how can we attract, train, retain and support more effective leaders of this kind?

¹ “Rolling Up Their Sleeves,” Public Agenda, 2003.



Observations

Based on this qualitative research, Public Agenda has outlined twelve insights from the interviews as a way to promote discussion about effective leadership for high-needs schools – how we define it, how we advance it, how we find more of it. What emerges from the interviews is often fascinating. It offers a concreteness and level of detail that are sometimes missing in broader analyses of leadership issues. We believe these interviews provide crucial clues to the mixture of skill and strategy most likely to ramp up school effectiveness and improve student learning.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this study has important limitations. First, although the interviews capture what school leaders say they are doing — and how they think and talk about their jobs — it does not include an independent analysis of student achievement in their schools and districts. Many were at work in schools designated as outstanding by well-known educational leaders. Some were selected because they were well-regarded graduates of the New York City Leadership Academy or professional development programs of the Wallace Foundation, but this study cannot independently confirm that all are obtaining the results they are aiming for.

Second, this project is a small-scale, exploratory study. It offers intriguing hypotheses and, we hope, useful insights, but it should not be read as a definitive picture of what is happening among effective leaders in high-needs schools nationwide. One important caveat is that leaders in middle schools and high schools are somewhat under-represented in this round of research, and we believe the field would benefit from additional research with significant samples of leaders in both elementary and secondary schools.

Observation No. 1: Transformers versus Copers

The superintendents and principals interviewed for the project were men and women from different backgrounds working in different high-needs districts in different parts of the country. As individuals, they were of course unique, but most fell into one of two distinct categories – they were either “transformers” or “copers.” The “transformers” had an explicit vision of what their school might be like and brought a “can do” attitude to their job. As one interviewee told us, a high-needs principal has to have “a vision... *It’s not just going in there and managing it all. It’s ‘Where can we take it?’... Vision for the kids. Vision for the staff. Vision for the school.*” Another talked about the need to avoid “*sending a message that the kids can’t do it,*” or taking an attitude of “*Woe is me,*” and “*Look how difficult this is,*” and “*This is an impossible task,*”— *that’s a really bad model. It’s really important [to say] clearly these things can be done, and we’re not going to focus on how bad the central office is, or we can’t get our request covered.*” Transformers focused intently on creating a culture in which each child can learn. Giving up is not an option.

The “copers” in contrast were typically struggling to avoid being overwhelmed. They didn’t have the time or freedom, or, for some perhaps, the inclination to do more than try to manage their situation. One described his position this way: “*I find myself wearing so many hats... it’s unbelievable. I just cannot free myself up.*” The circumstances facing some of the copers were daunting to say the least: “*They burned down part of my school in January,*” one told us. “*They destroyed all my textbooks and all my games equipment and everything. It took five fire engines to put it out. They stole four teachers’ cars, and they set fire to them... If you suspend a child, you have to be careful because they usually bring the father, the mother, the grandmother, and the two brothers to come and sort you out...*”

Whether due to circumstances beyond their control, or limitations in their own drive and sense of efficacy, there is little doubt that the copers were distracted from missions like strengthening teaching or solving academic problems. They were basically just trying to get through the day without having the situation deteriorate.

“If we’re not able to be in the classrooms to observe instruction and make sure... students are receiving high-quality instruction, then... moving the budget is not going to do anything.”

Observation No. 2: Instructional Leadership — Talk versus Action

Nearly all the leaders we interviewed – transformers and copers – talked about the importance of “instructional leadership.” In fact, in Public Agenda’s surveys of principals, nearly all of those interviewed rated good instructional management as “absolutely essential” to being a good leader.² But the transformers and copers differed markedly in what they did on a daily basis to advance it. Most transformers saw instructional leadership as their top priority. Typically, they were devoting the majority of their efforts to evaluating, coaching and supporting their teachers to do a first-rate job. In contrast, although copers talked about instructional leadership as part of their jobs, most didn’t seem to actually do much of it. Most were just too distracted or overwhelmed by day-to-day problems.

² “Reality Check 2006,” Public Agenda.

One of the transformers talked about instructional leadership this way: *“I think it’s the instructional leadership that makes a difference. The bottom line is we’re there to improve instruction so the kids can learn. We do all those other things too, but we’re there... to be able to go into a teacher’s class, and, if it’s a new teacher, identify [whether] this teacher [has] what it takes?”* Another said, *“At the end of the day, with high-needs schools, it’s really about student achievement and the instruction. If we’re not able to be in the classrooms to observe instruction and make sure... students are receiving high-quality instruction, then... moving the budget is not going to do anything.”* Another

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described a school culture that focuses on *“how can I have kids achieve — not whether kids [can] achieve. As you walk into the school, the dialogue is around what to do with the given child, how do we help that child, how do we help one another as adults in the schools?”*

Meanwhile, the copers were rarely able to get down to the instructional leadership business: *“You have to do so much,”* one said. *“At any given time you could be walking down the corridor, and you get seven different things hitting you at one time, and you were initially going to a classroom...”*

Observation No. 3: “Walking the Halls”

The transformers we interviewed were focused squarely on working directly with teachers on academic problems and committed to “walking the halls” to stay in touch with what is going on in the classrooms. Even if they walk the halls for no more than a few minutes a day, transformers see this as an invaluable way to stay in touch. *“You can’t be a closed door administrator,”* was how one of the transformers put it. *“You can’t go in and hide.”* Another told us that he does all of his deskwork before school begins, or after it ends, and spends the bulk of his time out of his office, walking the halls, in the lunchroom, or sitting in classrooms observing instruction. A third portrayed the principal’s role the way some of us might think of general going to the frontlines to inspire and build morale among the troops: *“[A] teacher’s going to be sitting there watching that principal deal with conflict... and they’re going to see that that principal is there when they get [to school] in the morning, that principal is there when they... leave. They’re going to see that principal going to PTO meetings ...”* Unfortunately, this leader continued, the commitment to being there was not universal in the district; *“We have a number of people in our school district who are certified principals who don’t principal.”*

For the copers, the concept of “walking the halls” often seems like a luxury — either they didn’t see it as vital or far more often, they just didn’t have the time. One said every time she tried to leave the office, she’d be hit with a new problem within ten feet of her door. Others reported continual distractions such as problems with the heating in the building or having to help mop-up the floor after a storm caused the school roof to leak. Transformers often did not have time during the school day as well, but they often stressed the importance of finding the time.

Observation No. 4: Drinking in the Data — Not Drowning in It

Many of the principals and superintendents said that reviewing and analyzing data on student learning is now a key component of their job, but they often described the task in very different ways. For many, including a number of the transformers, reviewing data on student performance and drawing insights from it was a means to an end — a way to set goals, analyze problems, and allocate resources where they can do the most good. One principal described the process: *“At first... all you see is, ‘Oh my goodness, 70% of our children are failing.’ Gloom and doom start to come down on you as an educator in a building. [But] when you get into the data, [when] you start delving into the data, you see that the reason why there’s a 70% failing rate is because across the board, children have holes in their ability to read or decode.”*

“I think one of the things that we’ve always had to struggle with is getting parents involved, especially those parents that we really need to see. It’s difficult to have them come to the school, and I don’t know if it’s because they’re threatened or intimidated by the school.”

Another talked about the importance of helping teachers understand and work with data as well: *“We’re doing a lot with data right now, and we’re getting the buy-in from teachers, so that they want to get the data. They want to use the data to drive instruction.”* Another tied data collection and analysis directly to the ability to personalize instruction, *“Now, we’re looking at the child. We’re... looking at data again. We’re going back to that data and looking at what specific needs that child has and how we can focus on that child and address those specific needs.”*

Others however saw data (at least in the form they received it) as a burden, not an asset. To some — a group that included both transformers and copers — dealing with data was yet another task eating up time that could be better spent elsewhere. One said: *“We’re sitting here trying to—where are the AIM scores? Where’s the language scores? That’s ridiculous, and that will take you two weeks to compile all that together. What has happened to the child?”* Another complained: *“A lot of teacher time is spent trying to take the data from here to put it over here.”*

A number of those we spoke to, transformers included, saw test scores as an imperfect and sometimes overrated measure of their school’s success. One transformer said: *“Sometimes you see the test scores and go, ‘Wow, they’re low.’ I challenge anybody to come into the school and see what our students are doing in the classroom to get a quality education. Yeah, the test scores are down. We’re going to try to get them up, but these kids are working hard. The teachers are working hard. Everybody is working to give them a quality education.”*

Observation No. 5: Parent Involvement

Parent involvement was another area where the lines between transformers and copers sometimes crossed and were less distinct. Nearly all the principals believed that parents play a central role in their children's achievement in school, and many talked about the special challenges facing low-income parents, many of whom have not had a lot of education themselves and who often face daunting challenges in their lives. An Arizona principal told this story: *"I go on vacation, and I go to a botanical garden. I hear the parents talk to the kids: 'Oh look at the stem. It's growing this; it's getting whatever.'... Our kids don't have that. Many of our kids... it's the best that the parents can do. I don't fault the parents. You know, on the scale, they're busy putting food on their kid's table."* Another principal in the same group said: *"I think one of the things that we've always had to struggle with is getting parents involved, especially those parents that we really need to see. It's difficult to have them come to the school, and I don't know if it's because they're threatened or intimidated by the school."*

Many of the principals also saw the ability to communicate with struggling parents and relate to their concerns and needs as a key component of being successful. *"People think that it's easy just to step in and do this job,"* one principal told us, *"but it is not easy. [People who become principals] need to know all of the ins and outs about the job and about how to communicate with one's community. When I say community, I'm talking about parents as well as children. What it takes [is] having a passion and a desire and a love for what they're about to get into, because certainly if there's no love... you might as well not go into the field."* An Indiana principal made a similar point: *"I think the relationship piece is huge, as far as*

dealing with parents, and especially with staff. If you don't have a good relationship, everything else is just going to fall apart. I think you need to be a patient person. You need to be a listener and hear what people are saying to you. I think it's not for someone who has autocratic tendencies."

Yet the principals seemed to differ somewhat in their views on whether increasing parent involvement should be at the center of their work. Some clearly had made this mission a priority and exercised some real creativity to make headway on it: *"I think it's very important for parents to know how they can support their child or children, but they won't come. You have to dangle the carrot out there in order to get them. I've learned how to step outside the box ... I said, 'You know what, if it's going to win people over, I can do an ice cream social to get mom to come out and get dad to participate.' I don't mind doing that, so I've learned how to do some things differently"* Another made a similar point, putting the onus on the principal to reach out to parents: *"It is a struggle. You need to make extra efforts to bring them into the school. This is an important – and not an easy – task. Visibility is key, and relationships are key. Parents look to you for leadership, and if they do not see that, they do not respond."*

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But other principals, including some who clearly saw themselves as transformers, had decided that students, not parents, should be the focal point of their work. A New York City principal was frank about the decision he had made: *“The children are there wanting to learn. I have zero parental involvement. [I’m happy to have] six parents that may come [to a school meeting]. At the end of the day, since we’ve tried all of these things to get parents in, do I still focus on parental involvement? No, that’s not an issue for me anymore. [For me, the issue is] having the children understand what needs to be done.”*

Observation No. 6: Shaking Things Up versus Consensus-Building

Many of the interviewees talked about the idea of a “turnaround specialist” – a leader who comes in and seizes control of an extremely troubled school, often replacing staff, establishing new rules, and applying a firm hand to everything that happens there. Some leaders saw a place for this kind of top-to-bottom shake-up coupled with “command and control” leadership. Severely dysfunctional schools can sometimes benefit from this kind of drastic measure, many believed. But for nearly all, consensus-building rather than shake-up was seen as the better long-term answer. Most believed that winning over the staff and community and working with them to carry out a plan for change is the way to genuinely transform a school.

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“It’s about communication,” one leader told us. “It’s about having a vision — that principal seeing in their mind what that school ought to look like and getting [others to] buy into that vision.” Another said consensus-building is the essence of great leadership. It *“means you have a planning process where you use data and build capacity with your staff. You’re your community ... It means being able to identify a high-performing team and empowering them to get the work done. You create the vision, the motivation, the plan, and the culture, and you don’t try to make decisions that can be much more effectively made by teams and those that are implementing the work.”* Most of the leaders we interviewed acknowledged that this approach takes time and demands staying power. What’s more, most admitted, it is not always successful. Even so, many saw it as the only way to ensure that progress is not dependent on charismatic leaders and that student learning continues to progress even when leadership changes.

Observation No. 7: Recruiting from the Farm Team

All of the Public Agenda interviews included questions about how to recruit more top-notch leaders to high-needs schools and where to find good candidates. And nearly all of the principals and superintendents interviewed believed the best source was young teachers or vice principals already in the schools – an education farm team so to speak. Many voiced doubts about whether it is

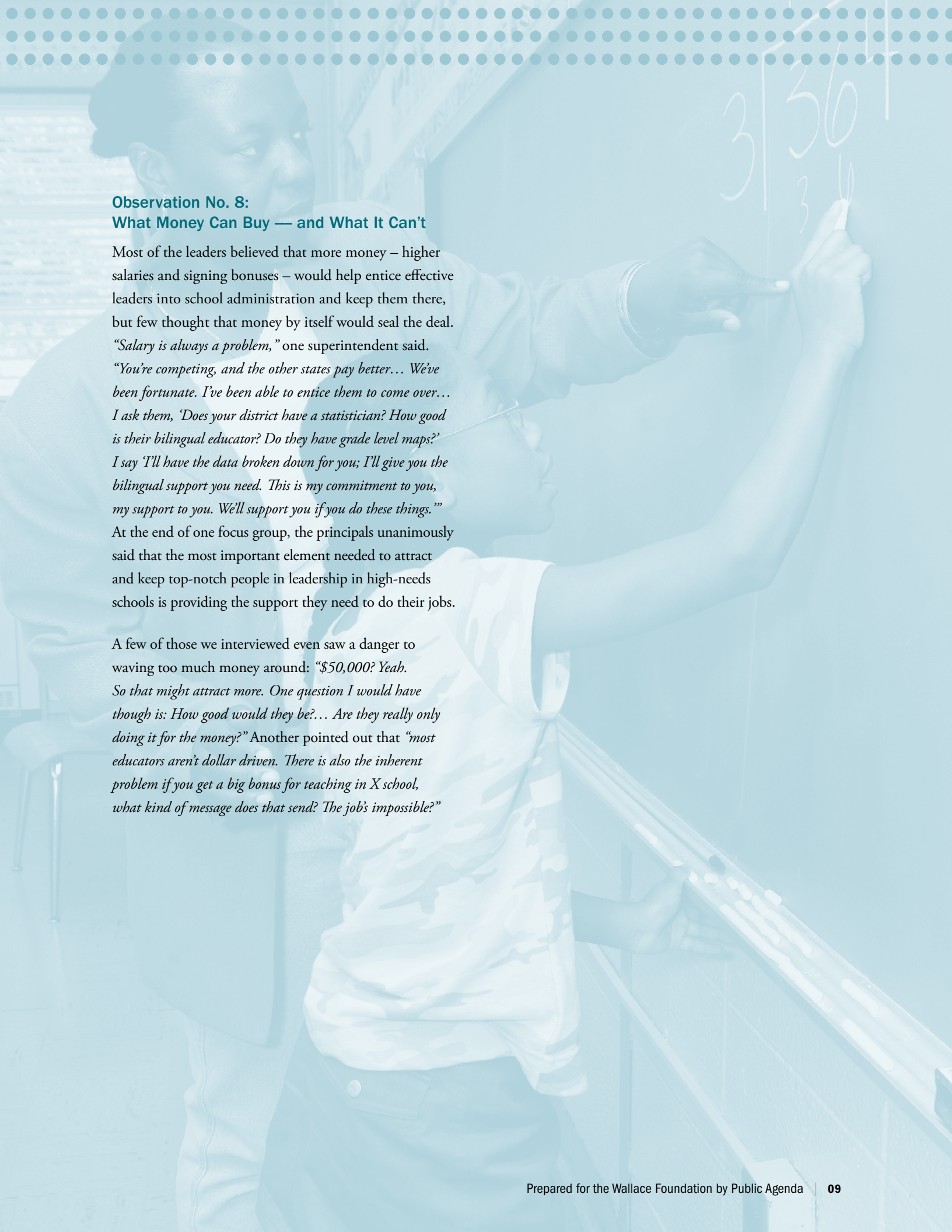
“You have to have the courage
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possible to be an effective education leader without experience in education. Asked to comment on the value of recruiting from within education versus recruiting from the corporate world, one principal told us: *“The difference is, in the corporate world, if you’re shipped a box of defective blueberries, you can always send them back. In education, if you have a defective child—per se, for the sake of what I’m saying—you can’t send them back. You must educate the*

child. You have to know how to get a defective child to the point of proficiency, as opposed to defective blueberries, send them back. Teachers too, we can’t send back.” The marked preference for culling new leaders from within education rested on a couple of concepts. Working educators were seen as having a commitment to schools and an expertise in how children learn and what good teaching means — qualities “outsiders” may not possess (at least in their view).

One leader told us that he was always on the lookout for young teachers with leadership qualities *“even though this might cost me my very best teachers.”* Of course, leaders weren’t always just eying their own staff: *“A superintendent has to be willing to steal from other districts,”* one admitted, *“and that’s what I’ve done.”*

Not all of the leaders ruled out the possibility of effective people coming in from outside education. One told us that someone with a business background might be promising if he or she possessed certain characteristics: *“They’ve got the business background for a start, but they also have to have the personal characteristics like the compassion, the connection with children. They can’t just have one. There’s got to be a balance.”*

A woman is writing on a chalkboard. She is wearing a white shirt and glasses. The chalkboard has the numbers 3, 30, and 3 written on it. The background is a light blue color with a pattern of small dots.

Observation No. 8: What Money Can Buy — and What It Can't

Most of the leaders believed that more money – higher salaries and signing bonuses – would help entice effective leaders into school administration and keep them there, but few thought that money by itself would seal the deal.

“Salary is always a problem,” one superintendent said.

“You’re competing, and the other states pay better... We’ve been fortunate. I’ve been able to entice them to come over...

I ask them, ‘Does your district have a statistician? How good is their bilingual educator? Do they have grade level maps?’

I say ‘I’ll have the data broken down for you; I’ll give you the bilingual support you need. This is my commitment to you, my support to you. We’ll support you if you do these things.’”

At the end of one focus group, the principals unanimously said that the most important element needed to attract and keep top-notch people in leadership in high-needs schools is providing the support they need to do their jobs.

A few of those we interviewed even saw a danger to waving too much money around: “\$50,000? Yeah.

So that might attract more. One question I would have though is: How good would they be?... Are they really only doing it for the money?” Another pointed out that “most educators aren’t dollar driven. There is also the inherent problem if you get a big bonus for teaching in X school, what kind of message does that send? The job’s impossible?”

Observation No. 9: Most Current Training? Irrelevant

As the school leaders defined it, effective training provides technical assistance such as learning about budgeting and compliance issues; it offers counsel on how to handle conflict and other challenges, and it gives principals and superintendents the opportunity to network and learn from each other. Very few had much positive to say about traditional training in its prevailing forms. *“Training in universities is irrelevant,”* one said bluntly. *“Too much lecture, too little action research, too little formation of groups, coming together and solving real problems. University teachers are too far removed from the realities of working in education. They are gifted at research, but off-base [about] what is actually going on in schools.”*

Others talked about how much the job of school leadership has changed and how little training there is once leaders are certified and on the job: *“We always think of training at the front end of the job. There’s very little training... [at] the other end of the principalship. I’m a senior principal. I’ve been doing it for 28 years, 29 years, something like that... The stuff that I learned... really isn’t that relevant now because the principalship is so much different today than it was 15, 20, 25 years ago... Think of the data. I still need training in that, and some other areas.”* Though many agreed that leadership in high-needs schools presents special challenges; some said that the skills it demands benefit administrators everywhere: *“I think everybody should be groomed for a high-needs school. There is nothing in terms of the skills needed for a high-needs school that wouldn’t also benefit a low-needs school.”* Principals overall feel that leadership programs in education are out-of-touch with current realities.³

² “Reality Check 2006,” Public Agenda, 2006.

On the other hand, many of our principals and superintendents questioned whether it is actually possible to teach all of the abilities a high-needs principal needs in a training program, even a very well-designed one. From their perspective, there is a set of basic character traits that effective high-needs principals simply must bring to the job – and either you have them or you don’t. One principal told us; *“A lot of people ask me now, ‘What is it like? I’m thinking about becoming a principal.’ I always say to them, ‘If you don’t know who you are as an individual, and if you’re not centered, you will crumble in this position.’ It tests every core of your being, every belief system that you’ve ever had.”* Another emphasized the importance of having strong core beliefs that are compatible with leading a high-needs school: *“When you’re dealing with personal belief systems, like compassion and some of the things we’ve talked about, it’s so hard, if not impossible, to alter or change them. It’s like racism or anything else. If you’re a racist, there’s not any amount of training... so the compassion to me... somebody may be trained in those areas, but eventually they fall back upon their old habits and the ingrained characteristics.”* Another named “courage” as an indispensable job requirement: *“You have to have the courage to stand by the conviction. Sometimes you have to have courage when you have to stand up to an angry parent. You just have to say, ‘Your child is not safe. He cannot stay in my school...’ Sometimes you have to have the courage to say to a teacher, ‘Perhaps this is not the vocation for you.’”*

Observation No. 10: Mentors – What They Can Teach and What They Can’t

The high-needs principals interviewed by Public Agenda gave almost universally negative reviews to traditional education courses as a way to prepare for leadership in a high-needs school. And to a greater or lesser degree, most said that there are some aspects and elements to effective leadership in a high-needs school that probably can’t be

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talked. Yet, many spoke about the importance of having mentors or coaches as a key component of their leadership training. Having the chance to work alongside a more experienced school principal and/or having a more seasoned colleague to reach out to for advice was generally seen as a much superior way both to inspire and teach people to become principals. A New York City principal said: *“With the mentorship that I do have with my coach at the Office of New Schools, I feel from last year to this year, I have made a huge professional leap... if I didn’t have that, I don’t think me reading a lot of books would have necessarily [helped].”* Another said *“The mentorship, for me, has been absolutely a wonderful opportunity – to share, and to have someone who is not a rating office, but is looking at me as an individual and seeing me through a continuum, [someone who] is able to identify: ‘This is how I’ve seen you grow. These are the things that you should consider to push your thinking further.’”*

² “Reality Check 2006,” Public Agenda.

As might be expected, a few principals had less positive experiences with mentors: *“There were some of my mentors who, I knew, didn’t have a clue as to what I needed to grow. I probably could have worn a big neon sign, and it still wouldn’t have been addressed. I had some mentors who didn’t listen or respect what I was bringing to the table. I had mentors who had followed the mentoring model, the coaching model, and kept asking clarifying questions, kept probing my thinking, kept pushing my thought process, and stretching my thinking to aid me in that direction. I’ve had mentors who had their own agenda...”*

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But the major thrust of many comments was that although mentors can provide excellent advice and support as a sounding board, they can’t, and shouldn’t be expected to, teach a principal everything he or she needs to know. Many of the principals emphasized repeatedly that there are personal skills and qualities that most likely can’t be taught at all. *“I had a great mentor as an AP principal,”* one of our respondents told us. *“You learn how to write a [SITE] plan. You learn how to do the budget. Those kinds of things, but the every day management of people, there is not training in the world that prepares you for that. That’s difficult.”* Another made a similar point: *“I had a mentor as a new principal. I had her for the first two years; this will be the first year without her. What I found, once again, was that she gave me the skills to, maybe, organize paperwork, or set up programs, or do those kind*

of mechanical routine things. But there was not anything that she added to me that would make me able to handle the job autonomously. There wasn’t... She couldn’t tell me how to hug that child when he got sent to my office because he had a bad night. That kind of stuff is not something a mentor can give you.”

And finally, many of the principals emphasized, being able to make decisions and judgment calls on your own is right at the heart of being an effective principal. Sometimes there is just not time to get advice. *“The kind of things – moving quick on your feet every day—there are things that happen every day that you don’t know they’re coming. You’ve got to be ready to deal,”* is how one principal described the challenge. Another pointed out that being able to make – and live with – your own decisions is just part of the job: *“You’re the only principal. You make the decisions. Sometimes some are larger than others. Sometimes they’re emotional. It can be a very lonely...”*

The loneliness of the job may be one reason why so many of those we interviewed had thought-provoking comments on the need to be able to network and consult with others in the same boat. Public Agenda moderators noted that in nearly every focus group, the principals lingered after the session talking and exchanging cards. It’s a relatively rare occurrence in the focus group trade. After talking with a moderator for couple of hours, respondents typically can’t get to their cars fast enough. But not in this project. Nearly all of these leaders wanted to continue the conversations they had started.

Observation No. 11: Want to Help Me Out? Cut the Red Tape

Public Agenda also asked the school leaders what kinds of changes would help them do their jobs better. Not surprisingly perhaps, the answers from the transformers were somewhat different than the answers from the copers. For example, nearly all of the leaders complained bitterly about bureaucracy and paperwork, but transformers were more likely to have developed ways to handle it and still meet their goals. For transformers, the chief obstacle was the continually changing nature of “the rules”—not so much the rules themselves. One talked

“Allowing us to get into the classrooms a lot more, allowing us to really observe instruction a lot more, taking away those clerical tasks.”

about how she handled the hurdles associated with removing ineffective teachers: *“I can at least speak on behalf of our district. We’re no longer doing the dance of the lemons... If you’ve got somebody who’s ineffective at a Title I school, if they need to be moved for any reason... usually you can get them moved... They do not go into another Title I school where they can do more damage... I’ve got the autonomy that I need. It’s just making sure that I clearly know my union contract [and] making sure that I’m doing the required documentation.”*

But for one of the copers, the problem seemed overwhelming: *“The time it takes to evaluate and document a bad teacher is unbelievable... Following the legal process, the due process... Three years is nothing, and then you still aren’t guaranteed to get them out because of the strong union. It’s very time consuming.”* Yet even though most transformers had found ways to work around the red tape, nearly all thought their time and energy could have been better spent.

Observation No. 12: Just Let Me Focus on my Job

Both the transformers (who had often found ways to work around problems) and copers (who were often barely treading water) offered multiple examples of the overwhelming challenge of trying to run a school effectively without administrative, clerical and other kinds of support. Among the problems our interviewees noted: being overworked, not having anyone to do the books, not having secretarial help; having to manage the buses, having to oversee the janitorial staff, even having to “clean up puke” themselves, as one told us. Asked what would help them make progress in their school, one said: *“Take [away] some of [my] responsibility. ... Transportation, I mean, give me a break — how am I responsible for a bus driver being rude at a bus stop?”* Asked what would help most, another commented: *“Allowing us to get into the classrooms a lot more, allowing us to really observe instruction a lot more, taking away those clerical tasks.”* As we noted in earlier, the vast majority of those we interviewed also considered more administrative help and support staff an essential ingredient in attracting and keeping top-notch people in high-needs schools.

Some Final Thoughts, Some Crucial Questions

Although this is a small-scale study, it does raise two important questions for policymakers, experts, and researchers. One is the degree to which “transformers” and “copers” are “made” rather than “born.” In our view, many of our transformers were astonishing human beings, passionate about their cause and bringing an array of values and skills to a very difficult task. But many also had the advantage of being in circumstances in which their district (or some other entity) had made some attempt to give them the autonomy and support need to be effective. And while some of our copers did seem a little too ready to go with the flow, others were also astonishingly committed people doing daunting, almost overwhelming jobs. With better support and more reasonable circumstances, could they become transformers too?

saw while we were conducting this research – inspiring people who were putting heart and soul into their mission. Most seemed to be working many, many hours a day at very stressful, albeit rewarding jobs. Our question is how long human beings can be expected to keep this up – even individuals as gifted and committed as our transformers. What are they giving up to be able to do the jobs they are doing? Are they making personal and family sacrifices that simply cannot be sustained? Is it reasonable to believe that they can maintain this level of energy and sparkle and passion years into the future? These leaders deserve a thoughtful answer, as do the children and communities that they serve. ■

Is it reasonable to believe that they can maintain this level of energy and sparkle and passion years into the future? These leaders deserve a thoughtful answer, as do the children and communities that they serve.

A second question is how long we can expect the transformers to continue with the sheer hard work and ferocious schedules they keep now. We’ve called this report “A Mission of the Heart” because that is what we



Superintendent and Administrative Interviews

Dennis Loftus, Program Director at The Delaware Academy for School Leadership:
Completed May 14, 2007

Diane Rutledge, Superintendent of Springfield (Illinois):
Completed May 14, 2007

Sandra Stein, CEO of The New York City Leadership Academy: Completed May 14, 2007

Wendy Robinson, Superintendent of Fort Wayne Community Schools (Indiana):
Completed May 17, 2007

Terry Grier, Superintendent of Guilford County Public Schools (North Carolina):
Completed May 17, 2007

Elizabeth Everitt, Superintendent of Albuquerque Public Schools (New Mexico):
Completed May 17, 2007

Peter McWalters, Commissioner of Education, Rhode Island Department of Education:
Completed May 29, 2007

Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools (Illinois):
Completed June 4, 2007

Mark Freeman, Shaker Heights/Cleveland (Ohio):
Completed July 31, 2007

Art Rainwater, Madison Metropolitan (Wisconsin):
Completed August 2, 2007

Dr. Joseph Rudnicki, Superintendent, Sunnyvale School District (California):
Completed August 7, 2007

Michael Gottlieb, Superintendent in Roswell (New Mexico): Completed August 7, 2007

Sandy Husk, Salem-Keizer School District, (Oregon):
Completed August 8, 2007

Dr. Jack Dale, Fairfax County Schools (Virginia):
Completed August 10, 2007

Kent Barnes, Holly Area School District (Michigan):
Completed August 14, 2007

Dr. Pascal Forgione, Austin Schools (Texas):
Completed August 15, 2007

Focus Groups

1. New York City Leadership Academy:
Thursday, June 28, 2007
2. Sunnyvale, California:
Tuesday, July 10, 2007
3. Fort Wayne, Indiana:
Wednesday, July 11, 2007
4. Phoenix, Arizona:
Thursday, July 12, 2007
5. Providence, Rhode Island:
Thursday, August 30, 2007

Related Publications

The following publications are available for free download at www.publicagenda.org. Also visit the website for updated analysis and full survey results.

Reality Check 2006: The Insiders: How Principals and Superintendents See Public Education Today

Jean Johnson, Ana Maria Arumi and Amber Ott

The fourth in a series of “Reality Check” reports captures the views of public school superintendents and principals on a range of current education issues including standards, teaching quality, financing and the challenge of school leadership. Most superintendents (77 percent) and principals (79 percent) say low academic standards are not a serious problem where they work. Superintendents are substantially less likely than classroom teachers to believe that too many students get passed through the system without learning. While 62 percent of teachers say this is a “very” or “somewhat serious” problem in local schools, just 27 percent of superintendents say the same. Supported by the GE Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The Wallace Foundation.

Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What’s Needed to Fix Public Schools (2003)

Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson and Ann Duffett with Beth Syat and Jackie Vine

According to this research, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, public school superintendents and principals say their biggest headaches are funding and the time it takes to comply with a blizzard of local, state and federal mandates. Some 93 percent of superintendents and 88 percent of principals say their district has experienced “an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them.” While unhappy with some of the specifics of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, the vast majority of officials surveyed believe that the era of testing and accountability is here to stay. But almost 9 in 10 call No Child Left Behind an “unfunded mandate,” and most say the law “will require many adjustments before it can work.” Superintendents from large school districts are much more likely to support the law’s key components than their colleagues from smaller school systems.

Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk About School Leadership (2001)

Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett and Tony Foleno with Patrick Foley

School superintendents and principals say that good leadership can turn around even the most troubled schools, but that politics and bureaucracy too often stand in the way. Large majorities say they need more autonomy to reward good teachers and fire ineffective ones. More than half of superintendents say they have to work around the system to get things done, and more than half of principals say they feel so overwhelmed by day-to-day tasks that their ability to provide vision is stymied. Funding for this report was provided by The Wallace Foundation.

Important, But Not for Me: Kansas and Missouri Students and Parents Talk About Math, Science and Technology Education (2007)

Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman with Amber Ott

There is growing consensus among the nation’s business, government and higher education leaders that unless schools do more to train and nurture a whole new generation of young Americans with strong skills in math, science and technology, U.S. leadership in the world economy is at risk. But this report, “Important, But Not for Me,” concludes that Kansas and Missouri parents and students didn’t get the memo. Our study finds just 25 percent of Kansas/Missouri parents think their children should be studying more math and science; 70 percent think things “are fine as they are now.” The report also explains why parents and students are so complacent in this area and what kinds of changes might be helpful in building more interest in and support for more rigorous MST courses. “Important, But Not for Me” is part of a three-year public engagement project on math, science and technology education conducted by Public Agenda and funded by The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

Enough Already: Parents in Erie and Atlanta Talk About Math and Science Education (forthcoming)

Jonathan Rochkind, Jean Johnson, Amber Ott and John Doble

With the support of the GE Foundation, Public Agenda has replicated the research of “Important, but Not for Me” in Erie, Pennsylvania and Atlanta, Georgia. To guide local and national leaders in designing more effective communication and building a consensus for action, the surveys asked parents in each city about their perceptions on the local economy and job prospects for their children. The surveys also sought their views on local schools and specifically how they rate the quality of math and science education their children currently receive.

Lessons Learned: New Teachers Talk About Their Jobs, Challenges and Long-Term Plans (2007)

Jonathan Rochkind, Amber Ott, John Immerwahr, John Doble and Jean Johnson

A joint project of the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality and Public Agenda, “Lessons Learned” is a national survey of first-year teachers that aims to help leaders in education and government understand more about the quality of current teacher education and on-the-job support and mentoring. The survey included 111 items covering issues related to teacher training, recruitment, professional development and retention. It also explored why new teachers come into the profession, what their expectations are and what factors contribute to their desire to either stay in teaching or leaving it.

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