CASE STUDY

The Persistent Dream: A Principal’s Promising Reform of an At-Risk Elementary Urban School

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A principal’s promising reform program that led to dramatic changes in student success in a K–6 elementary school on academic alert was investigated. This study was established to determine how an academically at-risk school that is facing state takeover has been strengthened. The researcher asked, what principles are at work in the changes the instructional leader instituted at her school, what actions did the principal take to improve the school climate, and, is there lasting substance to the new programs? The principal was “shadowed” in the school site and was engaged in conversation and writing. This article identifies 8 strategies that have been implemented for improving the school’s climate. Findings suggest that this all-Black school could become a model to show that at-risk children can learn with the appropriate programs in place spearheaded by a team of effective practitioners.

The news media has focused on the dramatic changes in student success within a seriously disadvantaged K–6 inner-city elementary school. This urban school was recently on academic alert, and it was documented as the lowest achieving elemen-
tary school in Alabama. However, it has quickly become recognized as the most improved in its public school system. Even though this all-Black school has achieved caution status, it could face state takeover if the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT–9) scores do not improve again this year and if it should fail to obtain clear status. This school’s increased test scores and, more important, its enhanced learning climate show that the principal, working together with educators, specialists, students, and the community to build a strong internal support system, can have a positive effect. Administrators have reported that this school is a promising model of reform for other at-risk schools searching for interventions that address the needs of their student populations (personal communication, October 19, 1998).

A SITUATED FRAMEWORK OF SCHOOL REFORM

The school that this article focuses on is fighting for its future. The principal of this school is among those educational reformers who are “changing our schools in profound ways; the schools of tomorrow must be highly deviant from the schools of today” (Goodlad, 1990, p. 27). Lynne Patrick has thought about what education must be and what schools are for—in fact, she has worked systematically and intuitively with her team to enable the children in her school to come ready to learn so that their chances for success can be increased. Stallings (1995) claimed that this holistic change strategy needs to be central to interventions aimed at promoting the success and well-being of children.

One of the major emerging views of tomorrow’s schools is that they need to become school–community partnerships to support increased levels of student success. A key component of school reform for disadvantaged groups involves the building of collaborative relationships with key members of the community (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Stallings, 1995; Whitaker & Moses, 1994). The school reform literature embraces change that will transform schools from bureaucratic infrastructures—that constrain the ability of school practitioners to serve their students—into communal systems that accommodate the learning needs of diverse student populations (McCaleb, 1994; Murphy & Forsyth, 1999; Smylie, 1996). Schools that redefine themselves as school–community partnerships form connections among family, health, welfare, justice, and education systems (Stallings, 1995). Lynne has included church partners and on-site community service professionals (e.g., nurses, counselors, police officers, parent volunteers) in her adaptation of this school–community model.

Stallings (1995) envisioned that as schools become comprehensive social service organizations, there will be hope for the special needs of nearly 13 million children from poor families in the United States, the more than 100,000 children who are homeless, and the 135,000 students who carry guns to school.
Learner-centered interventions, such as Lynne's, address compounded problems that affect the lives of such children—poverty, violence, abuse, pregnancy, parental abandonment, inadequate nutrition, substance abuse, hostile neighborhoods, and marginal housing (Aguirre & Turner, 1995; Kozol, 1991).

Against this backdrop, educational policy making has packaged a vision of school reform that focuses on national goals, curricula, and tests. This priority setting among policy makers and the public has shifted attention and resources away from the more serious problems that disadvantaged schools face (Epstein, 1996; Schneider, 1996). It is not clear whose interests this policy direction serves, but is clearly not in the best interest of the children (Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998), particularly those who are low-income minorities such as the students in Lynne's school.

Darling-Hammond (1996), Fullan (1999), and Kozol (1991) argued that great inequities have been reproduced in American schools and society for the underclass. They claim that policies need to be informed by local contexts and understandings created among educators, administrators, parents, and policy makers. The goal is for all children to have an equal opportunity to be successful and to experience high quality educational settings. Lynne's school is an example of a place struggling for schoolwide change through such reforms as new school policy and standards for student and teacher performance, state-level funding based on grants, volunteerism and donations from the community, on-site specialists, new educational and remedial programs, and year-round schooling. A fuller description of these reforms is provided later.

REFORMING THE RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP

One motivation for writing this article, and the short academic essay that prepared the groundwork for this fuller inquiry (Mullen & Patrick, in press), was to lend academic credibility to what has been up to now a popular media story. What academic principles are at work in the changes the principal has instituted at her school? Is there lasting substance to the principal's reform models and practices, or is this simply a story of dramatic gestures that have captured the imagination of the media? Lynne, the principal in this study, expresses concern that, although the school has benefitted from the media's spotlight, critical aspects of her story have been misunderstood despite verification checks. One such error reported that Lynne's school was no longer on academic alert status; at the time, this was not the case.

This article identifies the major strategies that Lynne, an educational reformer, has used to launch a community-building effort targeted at developing the support systems of her school. The authors hope this will serve as an inspirational portrait of an effective principal who has tackled the complex problems of her challenging
environment. A brief description of context—what the school was like when the principal arrived, what it is like now, and what this principal wants it to become—will be provided. To give significant information to school leaders and to those who prepare them, the article pays particular attention to the strategies that Lynne used to improve her school. In this context, Carol Mullen, the researcher, asked the principal, “What action have you taken to improve the climate of your inner-city school?”

Lynne is the main actor and informant in this study as well as the second author of this article. Carol gathered additional perspectives of the principal’s story of change from the teachers and staff at her school, from the news media, and from educators at the university where Lynne trained. An associate dean and an instructor have each followed the principal’s administrative journey, visited her school, and provided opportunities for their colleagues and students to visit the school. These educators have shared with many the work they call extraordinary.

Lynne is a White principal who has taught at the elementary level for 8 years, and she holds a specialist degree and a doctorate in education. Lynne has researched the attitudes of elementary teachers toward multicultural education and particularly as it addresses the needs of students of color living in poverty (Patrick, 1994). Carol, the researcher, studied the impact of multicultural literacy interventions on teacher and student development (Feuerverger & Mullen, 1995; Mullen, 1997). The authors share a commitment to at-risk, low-income populations and to diversity issues in schools.

Carol initiated this inquiry as a way of researching the stories about the struggles and rewards of leadership work in an urban ghetto environment that Lynne shared informally one day at a university. The authors had not known each other previously. The researcher wanted to learn specifically about how a school that is in crisis can become changed for the better, through the efforts of the principal, and about the social context in which such a school struggles for survival. The authors concur with Hart and Bredeson (1996) that “No discussion of the principal in the school would be complete without a view of the existing social world that a new principal joins” (p. 96). Accordingly, Carol “shadowed” Lynne in her 3rd year as principal and sustained a professional relationship based on inquiry and documentation. Carol visited the school and attended Lynne’s university lecture to education students on the challenges of at-risk schools for new teachers. She also engaged the principal in taped and informal conversation, follow-up discussions, and collaboration with the research and writing process. Moreover, Carol read the studies that have been most influential in Lynne’s work. These recorded conversations were produced as transcripts and analyzed thematically for the purpose of producing this account. Carol was the major researcher of this study and writer of this article.

This study has provided an opportunity to create a context for the dynamic, reciprocal learning of “the researcher” and “the participant.” The educational literature has yet to address how researchers and their participants can become
collaborators who investigate and write about significant events, especially those involving change within at-risk schools. Feuerenger and Mullen (1995) offer the additional insight that research participants need to become "writers of their own educational stories and, moreover, authors of their own lives" (p. 236). In this writing, the principal's voice is heard. Lynne had control over her story in two major areas: (a) accuracy of the details, perceptions, and facts reported; and (b) selection of the themes represented and materials included, such as quotations. This qualitative inquiry, then, offers to the literature the concept and practice of the principal as coauthor and as the final authority of the text and its message.\footnote{Empirical studies of the principalship and of organizational change, which make important contributions to conceptions of restructuring (Hallinger, Murphy, & Hausman, 1992), and to problem-solving processes (Allison & Allison, 1993; Leithwood et al., 1998), are simply not designed to enact a collaborative research and authorship model.}

Generally speaking, this also holds true for qualitative studies on the principalship. For example, Mertz and McNeely (1998) shadowed and intensively engaged two female principals to learn how they thought about their work. But the participants were not involved in the collaborative writing and authorship aspects of the project.

One exception is Dana and Pitts' (1993) study, which involved James Pitts, the principal, as collaborator and coauthor of a reflective analysis of his thought processes. Another exception is an edited volume on collaborative mentoring (Mullen & Lick, 1999) that involved current and former principals (and other practitioners) in researching their leadership practices. These examples underscore the larger potential for reform of the traditional researcher-participant relationship in any school site and at all levels.

New paradigms of education necessitate a change not only in structures and cultures, but also in relationships and roles (Hargreaves, 1997; Leithwood et al., 1998; Sarason, 1993). Researcher-practitioner relationships represent an area of educational practice that needs to be reformed. It appears that patterns in research continue to separate the participant from the more intensive possibilities that can come from shared inquiry.

THE SCHOOL AND NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

It is not easy being the principal of a school on caution status that serves two federal housing projects that happen to house rival gangs. But Lynne thrives on the challenge. This school overlooks a jail on one side and a cemetery on the other. In the city there is a cruel saying, "When the children look out of the windows, they see what their future will be." Lynne can afford to feel offended at this message because of the serious efforts she has made to recreate the school's environment from a
place with little success with the children to one filled with a sense of purpose and the future.

Most of the students at this school are one or two grade levels below standard, and some read far below their grade level. Literacy development at this school is challenged by many serious problems, such as poverty, parental unemployment, and an epidemic of addiction to crack cocaine that affects the neurology and the well-being of the children. Community apathy, child behavior that is violent and withdrawn, unsafe streets, parents who are incarcerated, and nontraditional families compound these problems. Aguirre and Turner (1995) argued that all-Black schools such as this one show effects such as these as residuals of more than 200 years of Black slavery and second-class citizenship in the United States. Bleak social conditions operate as a discriminatory barrier to equal educational opportunity for at-risk groups (Aguirre & Turner, 1995; Murphy & Forsyth, 1999). In this climate of hopelessness, Lynne perseveres at the dream of enabling the success of African American children.

Violence erupts without warning in this school, but the students are learning to verbalize their problems and to seek constructive solutions to their conflicts. More dramatically, Lynne tells of weaponry threats in the neighboring project housing and even of weapons found on students who fear harassment after school. She has, herself, felt threatened, especially when angry citizens have exposed handguns when she and the children have been near.

Lynne’s stories are “littered” not with playgrounds of giggling children, but with razor blades that they threaten to swallow (and spit out with the skill of a gang member once police arrive), crayons that are consumed during hysterical fits, knife scars across the back of the neck, and mothers on parole who disrupt their children’s lives. Lynne’s mindfulness about school safety is obvious in her daily actions (such as driving students home), programmatic wellness interventions, and methods for managing discipline (these actions are described later). The inner cities of Kozol’s (1991) studies made us poignantly aware that any investigation of such schools must factor in the harsh reality that children face (Macedo, 1999). For this reason, this description of a principal’s school reform effort provides social context to better illustrate the struggle involved in building a support structure in a place that is seriously problem ridden.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS THAT HELP AND THAT HINDER

This school has 36 certified teachers (including the principal and the assistant principal); 15 are nontenured teachers. Six of the teachers have special education credentials. Twenty-four teachers are African American, and 12 are White American; that is, two thirds of the teaching staff is Black. Six of the teachers are men, which is
a high number for the elementary school level. Lynne says that the teachers at this school are some of the best professionals she has ever worked with:

The teachers are the ones who made the difference. They do not raise their voices or attempt to control through fear. You need to understand that these are tough, street smart kids who just aren’t intimidated by adults. They throw rocks at police cars and yell and shout, so it’s all the more important that the teachers who are here and those who have stayed are wonderful with the children. The teachers do not engage the children in a power struggle.

This support system of administrators and teachers strives to meet the needs of an all-Black population of over 400 students who live in a gang-dominant, hostile area. As Lynne said,

When people who don’t get along are put into the same building for teaching, you shouldn’t be too surprised that you end up with an academic alert school with very serious problems. But the students have come a long way in improving their behavior and their academics.

Because this is a 100% Title I school, all of the students eat breakfast and lunch free of charge. The parents are generally in their early to mid-20s; other family members and foster care providers rear most of the children.

Only 8% of the students in this school have two parents in the home. Based on a survey of the children’s parents that Lynne designed and circulated in early 1999, approximately 73 parents in total are incarcerated or have recently been released from jail. This escalated family–school crisis has created serious discipline problems for the children at home, in the school, and on the streets. It is difficult to determine how many of the children in this school actually live with a parent because they reside in many different places, and they move around frequently. In some cases, the students do not know where they live or how to respond to that question. Moreover, the majority of the entering kindergarten children do not know their last names, an indication that they are living in a state of familial confusion. Some of the children do not even know their mothers’ first names, and they use “street” names for their siblings.

One longitudinal study examined how family structure affects serious crime (Harper & McLanahan in Gallagher, 1998). The researchers tracked the lives of 6,403 boys and discovered that boys who were reared without fathers are twice as likely to be jailed. Family structure proved to be a more important variable than any other, including poverty and discrimination. Consistent with this research finding is that the most severe behavioral problems that this school faces occur when fathers and mothers who have been absent (e.g., incarcerated) return to the neighborhood, only to ignore their children.
Lynne is aware of the impact of parental incarceration and release on the children and is empathetic. Parents who are paroled can secure custody of their children, but they must first establish a place of residence and employment, or at least be taking job training. Lynne has yet to witness these positive trends occurring in the families of her students, with parents who take job training, who secure a place to live or work, and who are awarded child custody. These newly released adults are too immersed in their troubles to take the necessary steps to become functional parents. Because of the pain of rejection they endure, the children act aggressively and even hurt themselves.

This is the kind of scenario that shapes the daily work of the team of practitioners at this school. Lynne sees the situation from the point of the view of the child’s own desperate plight: “It’s hurtful enough when you’re away from your mom or dad for so many years and then when she, usually the mother, finally comes back, everyone in the neighborhood knows you’re not living with her.” Lynne demonstrates more than empathy for the hardship of these children—she is a strong child activist who gets involved; who generates data for human understanding; and who demands changes that affect the root causes of neglect, abuse, and poor education in the lives of the students.

**PRINCIPAL AS REFORM CATALYST AND CHILD ACTIVIST**

Lynne was hired to be a catalyst for change in a school wherein about 40% of the students exhibit problems related to the effects of chemical abuse. Most of the children have experienced trauma and neglect, and some have been physically and sexually abused, often facing these traumas without familial support. As a compounding problem, the children tend to repress events that produce major trauma—one girl experienced her sibling’s death, but did not tell anyone. Lynne investigates her own hunches and then leads of others to determine the kinds of support that each child needs.

Lynne places stock in research that is informative about the critical issues that concern her school population. She has studied the lasting effects of neglect and abuse on children and the possibility of some recovery through wellness intervention. Research claims that children who live in violent neighborhoods are deeply affected: “the biological chemicals of fear are changing [the] brains of children [but] the brain’s plasticity also holds out the chance that positive experiences—psychotherapy, mentoring, loving relationships—might ameliorate some of the damage” (Brownlee, 1996, p. 71). Moreover, children do not have to be born addicted to drugs to exhibit the traits. Lynne and her staff see the result of children growing up with constant noise, confusion, and living in fear. Lynne is alert to the fact that these conditions can apparently alter the chemical composition of the brain.
Research on the lasting effects of abuse of children made Lynne realize how important it was that she change the school environment to accommodate this problem. The school staff had already been working sensitively with students they knew had been born addicted, but new action had been taken. For example, specialists were brought into the school to help the staff identify specific ways to work with children who were born drug-exposed and with fetal alcohol syndrome. Several of the children in the school fall into both of these categories. The on-site health care providers closely monitor them.

The school staff focuses on creating a safe and comfortable environment so that the students can become receptive to learning. The teachers know not to use a loud, raised voice, to avoid approaching the children from behind, and to provide learning spaces that are quiet and secure. The staff try to provide as much structure and predictability as possible because the children react to changes in the school routine. The students take time to bond with their teachers, but once they do, it is a deep connection. The students resist having anyone other than their teachers tell them what to do.

The students generally become very anxious when someone they trust at the school is not available for them. They persistently ask where their teachers are whenever they are absent and the students refuse to do work, throw temper tantrums, and storm out of the classroom. However, during those occasions when the teachers who were going to be absent for the day made an appearance in the morning to create a transition for the substitute teacher and for the children, the outbursts did not occur. This difference in how the students react to the absence of their teachers tells Lynne that the children respond to unexpected teacher absenteeism as a sign of more abandonment in their lives. The parallel experience for these children is with the absenteeism of their guardians. Banks (1993) wrote that children make assumptions about school and society based on their family experiences, which they use as "screens" to interpret life in school.

Lynne is passionate about drawing out the students who need special attention. She talks directly to the children in the hallways, in their classrooms, and even on the streets and in their homes. She finds out about those personal circumstances that require the intervention of professionals, including the local authorities. She is not shy about calling the police. She once showed up at the home of a 6-year-old student who had been left on her own with the responsibility of taking prescribed medication. Lynne assumed parental responsibilities and solicited the support of legal aid.

Lynne searches for solutions that match the actual needs of the children—regardless of how unconventional or extreme the solutions may seem to outsiders. She is vigilant about creating educational and wellness programs based on actual need, which, by most standards, is "radical" for a school administrator. For example, a major traumatic incident occurred this year when a 10-year-old girl suspected that she was pregnant and was uncertain who the father was. While she sat
despondently in class, Lynne worked proactively behind the scenes. The plight of this student made Lynne aware that students in general would benefit from a sexual abstinence program, which is aimed in this school at consciousness raising and changing the behavior of the children. Selected students receive one-on-one counseling from the school nurse about their bodies, abstinence, and sexually transmitted diseases. The strategies that Lynne has adopted to create change resulted from a series of highly challenging situations like those previously presented.

Lynne’s ability to recast this at-risk school as a place of possibility and renewal may have paradoxically helped it to improve. Critical theory questions whether democratic change in schools can occur when it is led by White leaders of privilege (Chalmers, 1997). We recognize that the United States has a long history of White “ladies bountiful” intruding on the lives of the poor and the non-White to “reform” them. This story unfolds in that context, and so it cannot be ignored. The evidence presented demonstrates that something very different is happening in the school where Lynne does her work across racial lines and where she does it effectively. This is a case study of one White, highly committed leader whose democratic actions focus on the development of holistic, child-centered practices for African American youth.

BUILDING SHARED VISION IN A SCHOOL ON CAUTION
STATUS

From the outside, this red brick school looks like a worn, industrial complex that was abandoned long ago. However, the yard is now attractive, and it is well maintained. In contrast, doors that are secured 24 hr a day greet visitors with No trespassing signs to keep out unwanted intruders. Strangers have been spotted in the school. Even the parents need to be monitored. Acting unpredictably at times, the parents would upset the teachers and the children. The building in this low-income community had to be made secure to curb disruptiveness as part of the larger effort of creating a safe learning environment. Visitors have to be buzzed in, and large, convex mirrors are used to monitor their entrance. (The office is not located at the front door.) Those inside the school can exit any door at any time—the security system of the doors prevents people from entering unannounced, but does not prevent people from leaving. This building, and its security system, is in compliance with the local fire codes.

The inside of the school offers warmth to visitors that should not be taken for granted. The remodeling and cleanliness required concerted teamwork. When Lynne opened the front door 3 years ago, the stench was unbearable. She had the hallway floors professionally stripped and cleaned to eliminate the bad odor. Church volunteers repainted the red-and-purple hallways sage green and off-white, soothing colors. Exterminators sprayed the school and remained on
contract. (During her first day on the job, Lynne poured a roach out of her soft
drink can.) The children take pride in the building now that it is clean and attrac-
tive. Very little graffiti appears on the walls, and littering has ceased to be a major
problem.

The large plastic Banana Reading Tree in the front corridor is accompanied by
the message, “let’s go bananas about reading.” It displays pride in the good reading
efforts of the children. The names of authors and their books appear on each ba-
nana leaf along with personal responses by the child. Pictures of African American
heroes are featured throughout the school in the corridors, in the teachers’ class-
rooms and on their doors, and in the principal’s office. Pride in Black heritage and
achievement has been promoted to improve the morale of the students and teachers
alike.

When Carol visited the classrooms, from one room to the next almost everyone
was hard at work on literacy activities. During one reading lesson, the children
were analyzing a habitat story about how pollution has affected the health and lon-
gevity of frogs. Each child responded to the gentle but persistent voice of the read-
ing specialist who worked closely with one small group at a time. Lynne asked the
students questions. They defined “habitat” and used details from the story to talk
about the suffering of frogs. Lynne complimented the fourth-grade-level students
on their comprehension—the story that they were discussing was for young adults,
not children. The students were on task because they had been assigned a reading
specialist for their own grade level. This same class, which had been observed as
academically on task, later received the highest reading score in the school on the
SAT–9 test.

The learning in this school is set against threadbare rooms that are mostly color-
fully decorated. Children’s artworks and special projects, and teachers’ displays,
bring these basic rooms to life. One teacher’s thematic reading display was partic-
ularly artful. The handmade display consisted of an exquisite set of paintbrushes,
each one fitted to the hand of a child and painted a different bright color; on the flip
side were comprehension questions about a story the children were reading. An-
other display spanned an entire room—it was an actual clothesline strung with
large, colorful letters of the alphabet. The kindergarten teacher moved energeti-
cally, combining the letters in different ways as the children responded in chorus
and pronounced the various sounds with accuracy. The older children were ab-
sorbed at the computers that had been donated.

Lynne’s vision as an educational leader is about “hanging tough, being lov-
ing,” which gets positive results in a challenging school such as hers. Like
Eileen McDaniel (1999), another effective principal who has studied her own
practice, Lynne builds vision in her school through “encouragement, support, and,
above all, a feeling of trust” (p. 196). When Lynne interviews teacher can-
didates for positions, she shares that her most effective teachers are compassion-
ate and very firm. She explains that being respectful and loving toward the
students does not equate to being weak. The teachers had told Lynne early on that the students perceived her as ineffectual because she did not “yell and paddle.” Lynne worked toward “letting the teachers see that the students respond well to being treated fairly and with respect.” She says, “It took over a year before the students could verbalize their problems without losing control. Building trust with our children is the key.” Lynne built trust with the children by visiting their homes and driving them home whenever they felt threatened, by talking with them about their problems and following through with solutions, and by showing that she was someone they could depend on.

STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL REFORM PROGRAMMING

This section describes what one highly effective principal has done to solve difficult school situations by identifying what strategies she has adopted and for what kinds of problems. Lynne launched a promising reform program that consists of eight strategies aimed at supporting the success of the children, the empowerment of the teachers, and the improvement of her school. Because principals and would-be reformers of schools do not learn how to enact many of the strategies outlined below, this section explains what structures and procedures were established and how the staff brought these about. These strategies, which were developed to address the needs of one seriously disadvantaged urban school, may not work in a different context, or they may work but only with the appropriate adjustments. The strategies can also serve school leadership preparation programs that could benefit from guiding principles of the principalship that are based on “real world” contexts (Leithwood, Jantzi, Coffin, & Wilson, 1996).

1. Apply a Philosophy of Discipline and Management

The teachers adopted a philosophy over the last 3 years that values “discipline with dignity training.” This view of educating children upholds a caring approach to establishing healthy conditions for learning, which includes the effective management of behavior. Areas given high priority were student supervision, regular school attendance, and respect for all children. The procedures that were established for propelling the vision of the school were documented in handbooks for the teachers, students, and parents. Previously, there were no such handbooks. Lynne brought about the procedures through faculty governance committees that established what the teachers needed to make the school a better place for the students to learn and for themselves to work.

The school gave student supervision high priority because some teachers would leave their classes without another adult present. The principal worked against
what she believed to be an unstated philosophy for most of the teachers: It was easier to tolerate bad behavior than it was to teach the students. However, the current school climate has established authority for the adult and respect for the child. Lynne explains that this is the essence of “discipline with dignity training”:

When using discipline with dignity training, the teacher or parent never engages the child in a power struggle. You shouldn’t get into an argument with a child if you’re an adult. If a child tries to argue with me I say, “I am the adult and you’re the child and this is something that you need to do.” I say my own part with respect and in a slightly joking way, and then the child gets on with it. But if I were to stomp my foot and command, “You’re not going to tell me what to do and you better do what I tell you,” that would do nothing but cause problems. So, you have to very carefully watch how you talk to children and [how you] treat them. They want to be treated with dignity, and if you respect them with honest feeling, then they will pretty much do what is best.

2. Rely on and Develop Support Systems

A core group of effective teachers who genuinely cared about the children constituted Lynne’s essential support system:

These teachers may not have agreed with everything that I was doing, but they supported me and let me learn through my mistakes. They also gave me suggestions. When they felt like something was going on that I needed to know about, they would always inform me.

This kind of support is consistent with the claim that teachers are the primary source of influence on new principals (Crow & Matthews, 1998; McDaniel, 1999).

Four of the 34 teachers have been at this school for about 10 years. For Lynne, the long-term teachers stand out as leaders who see teaching as a calling to help the children. These teachers build trust by working with the students on a one-on-one basis and during off-hours. They also talk with each student to learn his or her special needs, family circumstances, and goals; these teachers seek solutions to their problems and proactively involve the expertise of the on-site specialists. These exemplary teachers consistently reward the children for their achievements and positive acts; for example, they take the children on educational trips, and they also pay for what the children need.

Lynne views these long-standing teachers as activists, on behalf of children, whose conviction has been tested in many ways, such as by having to adjust to more styles of principalship than the other teachers in the city: “It’s that core group that really loves those children, that made a personal commitment to make things
better for them, that also supported me and helped our network to grow.” Just as the teachers influenced Lynne by their expectations of her role, she shaped their professional development. For example, Lynne set new standards for teacher performance, which included requirements for current study in formal educational programs.

Lynne and her staff have developed themselves as a support system. Together, they have explored how to use the inquiry method to improve their SAT–9 science scores. As another example, the staff has developed specialization in the areas of reading intervention and technology, as well as children’s literature and mathematical manipulation. When Lynne received a $50,294 grant from the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, she and her teachers together selected the nationally approved Carbo Reading Styles Program. The key to the success of this program was initial and continued staff development, which began in 1998.

Another major support system has been the community stakeholders, primarily the eight churches that have adopted this school as part of the Strategies to Elevate People (S.T.E.P.) Foundation. This program has brought together 26 Black and White churches from 10 denominations to serve the needs of the residents of 9 public housing communities. Ten of the school’s families were able to celebrate the December 1998 holiday through gift-giving. The churches also donated the teddy bears for the school’s “reading buddy” program, computers for the advanced grade levels, and funds for the major clean-up of the school and other projects. They continue to provide for the “clothing closet” and such learning incentives as the annual riverboat cruise for the sixth grade graduating class. The value of external sources of support to problem-ridden schools such as this one cannot be overestimated (Crow & Matthews, 1998). Lynne’s theory of why it is important for a leader to make connections with the community is based on the experience that “it takes a whole village to raise a child,” especially students like hers.

As alluded to earlier, the other major support system has been made up of the health professionals who Lynne managed to employ directly on site. The nurse and social services coordinator (SSC) have proven to be critical to the school’s academic success and to its improvements. Because few of the parents of the children have telephones and even fewer have transportation, Lynne made health appointments for the children in the community during her first year. Previously, she would make arrangements for a child in crisis to receive help only to learn that parents sometimes did not follow through. The principal wrote grants to hire full-time specialists to dispense the medicine, take care of the injuries, and to make the calls for sick children on site.

The SSC worker schedules the health appointments and conducts parent meetings, including the anger management class, with 12 of the more serious cases. The practitioner aims to involve parents in their children’s learning and problems; moreover, she encourages parents to become involved in school governance and to
participate as classroom volunteers. The SSC worker also coordinates the workload of the adolescent behavior therapist and even assists parents to receive Medicaid and Kids First insurance.

The nurse helps by coordinating all of the programs previously mentioned. She additionally manages an asthma support group, arranges for dental screenings, and assists parents and their children to make appointments. Many of the children have vision problems, which helps to explain some of their problems with reading. The nurse also conducts schoolwide vision screenings. When a child who is sick is sent home, the nurse calls or goes to the house to check on him or her.

These combined actions have helped student attendance tremendously. In 1996–1997, attendance was 88%, the lowest in its public school system. In 1998–1999 the school maintained 95% daily attendance. If a child reports that a sibling is at home sick or injured, the nurse and the SSC worker provide the necessary services. The nurse also reports directly to a department of human resources and to the school’s police officer, all of which helps to support the basic needs of the children.

The improvement of Lynne’s school, through multiple program interventions and coordinated, shared leadership, fit with George, Grissom, and Just’s (1996) portrait of inner-city elementary schools. They produced a study of ethnically diverse schools in California that were moving in positive directions. Their “stories of mixed success” emphasized how schools need to have strong leadership teams with a “commitment to change” and a “common vision.” Schools that were rated the highest demonstrated a capacity for change, were team-oriented, possessed high expectations of at-risk children, and, important, were prointerventionist. Like Lynne’s school, these schools offered supplementary programs that support the goals of the school focused on the success of the children (e.g., year-round schooling aimed at alleviating attendance problems).

3. Precipitate Staff Changes

Forty percent of Lynne’s staff changed at her encouragement. Four teachers were transferred to other schools, two resigned, and two retired, which resulted in a major staff turnover in a short time. Those teachers who were transferred understood curriculum and instruction, but they were “burned out” from trying to meet the heavy demands of this school, so Lynne worked with the human resource department to transfer them to other schools. Several of the untenured teachers whose actions toward the children were harmful were “nonrenewed.” These staff changes occurred early on in Lynne’s career, and they set the tone for a highly committed staff that makes decisions to benefit the children. Staff changes continue to occur.

Lynne made these staff changes by using criteria that she had developed through extensive classroom observation. She made determinations about the ef-
fectiveness of teacher performance based on how well the teachers were able to teach the material and to communicate with the children, including those with disabilities. She looked specifically at how teachers used their authority in the classroom and at their professional judgment with children identified as having deficiencies (e.g., anger control problem). She also assessed what the students were achieving academically through, for example, reading activities. Lynne made special attempts to talk with the children to determine how they related to their learning environment. She watched classroom dynamics on a daily basis to learn whether the children appeared to feel safe in their settings.

4. Create Rituals of Visibility and Relationship

Rituals can be used to demonstrate the value of healthy, caring contact between adults and children. The principal jokes that she had to become “a morning person” so that each child could be greeted at the front door. On her notepad she records who needs help, with whom she needs to consult, and about what issues. Lynne makes use of this ritual to collect data to identify specific physical and emotional needs. For example, her jottings have reminded her to discuss certain family-related matters with her health care workers. Lynne also uses this time to reinforce positive thinking, the readiness to learn, and the children’s trust that she will work on their behalf.

Lynne is able to determine the nature of the problems that the children face by what they disclose to her. For example, children have expressed fear when another student has threatened to physically harm them. Another kind of situation has involved students who were upset because their guardian could not be located to sign their consent form for a special activity, in which case Lynne attempts to locate the adult in question. Lynne stresses that mutual trust is at the root of her ability to learn about the specific kinds of problems that her students experience. Just as she trusts them to accurately represent their lives and what they need for their academic achievement and well-being, she believes that they trust her to understand their concerns and to follow through with helpful solutions.

Some students arrive as early as 7 a.m. because they do not have alarm clocks or someone who will ensure that they arise at the proper time. Some of the students show up late for the same reason, but Lynne has been known to send a messenger to them. All of the children eat breakfast, which is why even the latecomers are fed—in the privacy of the principal’s office where snacks are kept.

Lynne is openly affectionate. She hugs the children and engages them in special talk. For many of the students, the only hugs they get are at the school. The children appreciate their principal’s visits to their classrooms and her interest in what they are learning—the students know their principal and they adore her, as is evident from their prolific gifts of art. One handmade Valentine’s Day card carries
this message: “I love Dr. Patrick. Because she is nice. She mak my hart swim [sic].
Love Clarissa.” A second one reads, “You are a nice lady. You have nice hair. I am
glad that you’re going to this school. I love you.” A third one that carries a racial
and religious message says, “I do not care if you is Black or White, I still love you.
You are a good parson like God and Jesus [sic]” (1999).

In a book the kindergarten children made, the principal is the main character.
Words to describe her include “special,” “our next door neighbor,” “great and
pretty,” “our friend,” “good principal,” “nice,” “helps us,” “likes children,” “co-
mes to our room,” and “very tall.” Each drawing is different, but they carry a simi-
lar message: that the principal’s caring is larger than life. Lynne enjoys being
imagined as a happy tree with long legs that stretch way up, cradling a big smile.
She celebrates being seen as special and accessible through the eyes of the chil-
dren.

Visibility is a significant action that has been found to model high academic and
interpersonal expectations for teachers and students alike (Petersen, 1998). In one
classroom that Carol observed, the children shifted to a performance mode when
their principal arrived. They each assumed part of a dragon’s costume, an elabo-
rate red and gold ensemble that they had made. Parading around in a solemn fash-
ion, undulating at the encouragement of the teacher, they celebrated the spirit of
the Chinese New Year. The principal was delighted and applauded. She compli-
mented the actors as well as the standbys to whom she referred as a supportive au-
dience. High acceptance of a relatively new principal—especially one who makes
many spontaneous visits—cannot be taken for granted and must be established
through school ritual (Bolman & Deal, 1993). Lynne brings high visibility to the
work of being an instructional leader through her conception and practice of the
role. For example, in addition to the spontaneous classroom visits, she makes
many home visits that the media record because of the perception that her invest-
ment in the welfare of the children in an at-risk, all-Black school is unusual—to
Lynne, she is doing her job. Lynne makes herself accessible to the children, and to
those who play an important part in their lives, to target where help is needed.

5. Apply Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” Model

Satisfying children’s basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, health, safety, and shelter)
has been a top priority for Lynne. She is invested in Maslow’s model of evolution-
ary needs and human development (in Joyce, Weil, & Showers, 1992) because the
children cannot learn, or be taught, until their basic needs are met. Curricular and
instructional improvements matter only when basic needs are accessed and met on
an ongoing basis. Without the security of this foundation, the students lack purpose
and the hope of a future. But even as Lynne focuses on survival and safety demands
in the school, she prepares for higher level concerns of social acceptance and
self-actualization. The new programming is helping the children and the parents to build the capacity to grow stronger.

6. Design New Educational and Remedial Programs

Programmatic highlights at the school include

- **WAIT (Why Am I Tempted):** Teaches children about sexual abstinence (as opposed to sex education) and self-restraint.
- **Anger management:** helps children who have violent outbursts.
- **Saturday school:** provides 70 academically strong students with enrichment through special educational projects during a 10-week program. Guardians have reported improvements in their children’s reading and math skills.
- **Summer school:** gives attention to children who need extra academic and social support.
- **Read Aloud program:** teaches young children to enjoy books and quiet time.
- **Peace Works training:** promotes social skills (e.g., Rules for Fighting Fair and I Care Rules) for 30 min daily during the first semester. Children learn that hands are for helping, not hurting; they also work on accepting responsibility for their actions instead of shifting blame to others.

The principal chose these programs to develop conditions that would support the ability of the students to achieve their academic goals and dreams. These particular programs were selected on the basis that they directly addressed the needs of the children and school. For example, many of the children were arriving at school angry every day; Lynne came to see this problem as a schoolwide issue that the mental health staff, teachers, and others had also identified. Consequently, the Anger Management program was developed. As another example, the Peace Works training evolved from the desire on the part of the faculty and churches to teach the children important social skills. Lynne had read positive reports about the use of Peace Works as an effective intervention for schools like her own, including one in New York where the children did not even have housing—they lived in makeshift shelters. Lynne has in part adopted strategies that have been used by schools similar to her own and that have already been tested.

7. Implement Teacher Development Standards

The teachers undertook a strenuous professional development program to meet competency requirements. Lynne introduced a new structure by forming a faculty
governance committee that worked cooperatively with state department assistance teams to guide their own learning by using, as the chosen format, a series of thematic workshops. Through this restructuring effort, the teachers became familiar with the SAT–9 format and the compendium as well as the grade level test score from 1998, all in an effort to identify the weak areas of the achievement test. Teachers taught different, related activities for their grade levels each week. They learned how to interpret the test data and how to develop an individualized plan to increase the percentile ranks of the students in reading, math, and language. The use of such standards combined with mentoring assistance has helped the teachers to become accountable to the national-level expectations of the SAT.

Other staff development workshops were designed to improve areas that had formed patterns of weakness over time at the school. By analyzing the SAT–9 testing results, Lynne established a focus on reading in her first year at the school, reading and math in her second, and science in her third.

8. Develop a Case for Year-Round Schooling

Lynne prepared a case for year-round schooling as part of her overall school improvement plan. She gathered information, through the use of a survey, from key stakeholders about their views on year-round schooling—ranging from the students to guardians, churches, and community organizations (e.g., YMCA). For the Boys and Girls Club of America, which is an academic tutoring and athletic organization, she discovered that it was willing to accommodate her students during the new intercessions that year-round schooling would, if supported, introduce. Lynne and her faculty research team interpreted the data, which favored year-round schooling from all of the stakeholder groups.

Lynne presented the report to the board of education. The request for the support of year-round schooling for her school was approved, despite opposition and the recent failure of a nearby White-majority district to win its own case. Lynne argued that alternative schooling is not the best choice for every community, but that it was needed for hers:

Otherwise, the kids are left on their own too much, which is detrimental to their learning. The three-month summer break presents a serious setback to my students, as do the other extended holidays during the year. Teachers suffer, too, because they have to constantly reteach material.

One member at the meeting argued that parents did not want to be on the year-round schooling calendar because it interferes with church and vacation. The principal responded, “But did you talk to the parents of my school?” to which the person replied, “No.” She continued, “Every community is different and the parents [and
others) of my school told me through a survey that they want year-round schooling. Besides, the churches love the kids and they want to accommodate what’s best for them.” The important point here that Lynne was teaching is that policy must take into consideration the local context (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Fullan, 1999).

Lynne is the first in her city to adopt the alternative calendar, which was effective in September 1999. It has continued to provide for 175 school days of instructional time, but spread over 12 months with short breaks instead of long ones. During the first week of each 3-week intercession, the school provides reading enrichment for students who need or who request the services. This is a critical part of the year’s plan, which is aimed at preventing the students from getting further behind.

CONCLUSION: A PRINCIPAL’S VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Lynne would like for her school to become a model to show that poor, inner-city children can learn with the appropriate programs in place spearheaded by a team of highly effective practitioners. The reason so many people are proud of this school is that it has proven just that; however, the school still has a long way to go. Lynne recommends year-round schooling as a possibility for schools that have special academic and social needs.

Leaders should not hesitate to go “out on a limb” to deal with the realities of their school environment. To further strengthen the climate of at-risk schools, leaders need to establish relationships with partners in education. Lynne and her staff work closely with their church partners to meet the basic needs of the students and to provide incentives for their learning. The churches are salient in this community; they have won a place in Lynne’s heart because of their ongoing contributions to and volunteerism within the school. Lynne does not plan to search for more church partners; her focus is on strengthening relationships with those that have already demonstrated their commitment. She hopes that when the children are adults they will understand the value of community in raising at-risk children and in supporting at-risk schools.

Lynne and her team will also continue to prepare preservice teachers to become effective leaders of inner-city schools. Student interns who believe that strong leaders can rescue disadvantaged schools from their troubles will need to learn that complex social forces are at work in the situations leaders strive to create (Sibicky, 1996). The story of Lynne’s experience teaches that such inner-city schools cannot be rescued—but they can certainly be made resilient through the support structures of a compassionate community. “Pursue your dream with persistence” is her message to those who aspire to work with “at-promise” children and schools.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is a tribute to the memory of Dr. Dennis Sabo of Auburn University, whose child activism continues to inspire Lynne Patrick and her public school system, benefiting many youth. She has opted for the anonymity of her school and city because of the sensitivity of some of the issues.

We thank the anonymous reviewers who provided thorough commentary on this article and the editorial board that provided supportive feedback.

REFERENCES


