

LEADING CLEVELAND'S EXCELLENT SCHOOLS

On October 1, 2007, the principals and other leaders of the 13 schools selected for inclusion in the Cleveland Schools Excellence Project met to discuss what accounted for their success in helping students to advance academically. They represented public, parochial and charter schools serving children in pre-kindergarten through high school. The conversation was facilitated by Dr. Gerry House, President of the New York based Institute for Student Achievement. A lively discussion ensued. The participants identified the following elements features of their of leadership were identified as critical to leading their schools' success: mission-driven stance; a "whatever it takes" culture; a safe and orderly environment; perseverance and flexibility; personal relationships; persistent parent inclusion; an ethos of continuous improvement; high expectations, and support for innovation. The statements in italics are direct quotations from the principals who participated in the session.

Mission-driven stance

Underlying the principals' commitment to their often challenging jobs was a passion for the work and a belief in mission. For some principals, it was a religiously-based conviction that a life dedicated to service is of value. For others, there was a desire to create a new and better approach to the education of urban children. Some simply loved children and were willing to do whatever it took to give them better life chances. In all cases, they were clearly making personal sacrifices for what they believed in. This was often reflected in the attitudes of their faculty and staff as well.

Our way of making decisions contributes to our success. They are made based on what is best for children.

Our community honors individuals of all ages who come together to learn. Each child is known as an individual, as a capable learner, met where they are and taken to the next level.

You've got to know what it's about. You know what it's like to work with urban kids. I wouldn't trade my job for anything.

There is a high level of commitment by faculty. Taking extra responsibilities and duties is part of who the faculty are.

Developing the culture

When the principals were asked about the two or three things that accounted for their success, almost all mentioned some aspect of their culture. In some cases, this had strong historical roots; in others, it had been carefully and consciously nurtured by current or former school leaders. Some schools based their cultural norms on their faith; others on their belief in the importance of the work. The culture was often expressed and enhanced through the use of established rituals, routines, and practices. Generally, the culture engendered a "whatever it takes" attitude among the staff.

In schools with a long history in their neighborhoods, strength was derived from being a part of the community; in these cases, the parents often were committed to the school culture as well.

Another thing that contributes—the CA way. [This is a] set of governing rules that fits our culture and climate: how you walk in the halls, the way you interact in the classroom.

Ours is a 125 year old school with strong traditions... We get lots of support from the sisters of Notre Dame. There is a very powerful educational heritage. Our goal is to keep that alive, to in-service new teachers on this.

You need trust everywhere in the building. Even when there's a union, everyone pulls together. When you open up and let people teach well, you build community.

Another beautiful thing about CSFA: it's cool to be smart.

A safe and orderly environment

The school leaders devoted a lot of time to establishing norms and routines that create the foundation for a safe and orderly environment. This was seen by most as a precondition for effective learning to take place. They believed that students who felt safe and at ease were more likely to make progress educationally. In many schools, this involved establishing clear rules for behavior and staying unflinchingly committed to them. Teachers were often involved in setting rules and in creating a climate in which rules would be followed.

Several schools had established programs to prevent violence, most notably the PeaceBuilders program in which students learn how to deal with anger. In the parochial schools, the religious teaching and prayer also served as a foundation for creating positive behavioral norms.

We keep reflecting back to children [and asking] "What would be a better choice?"

We are working on systems of positive behavior. The district has adopted a modified version. The behaviors are keyed to different parts of the building. This keeps everyone ready for learning.

Ten years ago we started the PeaceBuilders program, a national program that promotes non-violence. We teach the PeaceBuilder principles each year. Because of this program and our faith foundation, we have an environment where we can educate children.

Perseverance and flexibility (trying the window when the door closes)

Many of the principals experienced adversity—sometimes major and extreme hardships, sometimes small but irritating occurrences. Some of this stemmed from inside the

schools; but much of it was attributed to external sources. They talked of the need to demonstrate flexibility and a determination to overcome each problem as it emerged. Some had been ready to quit; others had never considered it. In all cases, they showed considerable grace in confronting adversity and a willingness to take on the world if it meant that children would have a better chance. They were exemplars of the “whatever it takes” culture.

In a number of cases, principals were able to survive adversity because of the willingness of their staff to participate in creating solutions. Some of the principals told stories of difficulties that were overcome when everyone pulled together and supported the school, the children, and each other.

You just have to deal with whatever is thrown your way.

I worry because I’m teaching standards and how to take tests. There are so many things I want to teach. I hope we can get to the point where we are so strong that kids can do beautifully on the tests. [Then we can] avoid putting direct focus on the tests and can teach more important things.

[It’s the same for] publics, charters, parochials—you jump through the hoops because of the money and because it’s for the kids.

Personal relationships

These principals established close, mutually helpful relationships with teachers. They gave teachers respect and decision-making power; in exchange teachers were willing to go the extra mile. Relationships with children and families were also important. Every school in this project was a small school in which children were known individually by the principal, and more deeply by their teachers. Principals recognized the transformative power of these relationships.

Several principals talked of placing the needs of teachers ahead of their own. They believed that if the teachers were treated as professionals, they would do everything in their power to teach well and meet the children’s needs.

I think [it’s about] trust. It plays a key role when your faculty feels like they can trust you. All that helps.... Letting them know that you care about them. Not just being a manager; being a model for how you want them to be with the kids.

My job is to make sure that my extraordinary professional teachers can teach. Whatever they need from me, it’s my job to give it to them.

Teachers ask things of you. When you say “yes,” you can ask more of them.... [It’s also about a] personal touch, “How’s your mom. How’s your knee.” Also you let them know who you are.

Arms are put around those who are new—teachers feel very different than they have in other buildings. They say, “I can’t believe how everyone’s willing to help.”

Persistent parent inclusion

Parents were seen as important and usually willing partners, although this was not always the case. Parents supported their school, and their children’s learning, in many ways: by volunteering, providing materials, and through watching out for the school after hours. Parents who were not so eager to be involved were continuously pressed, cajoled, and supported to become a part of school life. Principals believed that while students should be responsible for themselves, they were more likely to succeed when parents were backing them up.

Parent support [at our school] is good. They are backing the school, want to be helpful, like the climate at the school, feel at home and welcomed. Good relationships with parents make it easier to deal with problems that arise.

We have respect for parents as partners. [The school and the parents] sign a contract agreeing what each will do to support the child’s education.

An ethos of continuous improvement

These principals were committed to developing and sustaining an ethos of continuous improvement. They emphasized their commitment to learning and building, along with their staffs, better ways of doing things. In some cases, this was done by examining and reflecting on available data. In others, it meant spending time and resources on professional development. Some school leaders made an effort to learn about best practices in other schools. An environment in which adults were learning and growing was seen as a good example for children.

We make lots of decisions based on best practices. We make visits to schools to learn others’ practices. We’re always evaluating what’s going on.

We always look at data, tests, formative assessments; teachers turn in the binders monthly. Either I or the Assistant Principal is always at the grade level meeting.

High expectations

The principals believed that every child could learn: children of all backgrounds, talents, and life experiences, learning-disabled children, children with overwhelmed parents. They were not willing to make excuses, or to accept excuses from children, parents, teachers, or other staff. In many cases, this meant constant vigilance and extra time spent keeping everyone on track—insisting that homework be done, that children be in school on time, and insuring that teachers were using diverse, creative instructional methods.

[This work requires a] relentless insistence on excellence in every component of the school- eating, learning, everything. It’s very tiring; you can never relax your standard.

Our main focus is “every child is going to go to college.” Most students come with a 3rd grade level. We focus on bringing all children along in reading and math. We spend a lot of time on these, especially reading.

Innovation

Although much of the success described by the principals primarily reflected their day-to-day hard work to maintain high standards, a number of principals talked about innovations that were implemented in their schools. Some of these were based on nationally known program models; others were locally created. In some cases, innovations had been attempted and abandoned due to changes in district or state policy or because of budget cuts. However, a number were well underway and many were proving to be successful.

There is a theme for each year. We read the same books in the summer as a springboard into the theme.

We have an age-integrated developmental approach to learning. It’s life-long learning using a non-graded approach. We reject grade levels; classes are multi-age.

We are doing split gender classes in our middle school based on discussions among teachers.

All students are in jobs-- mainly businesses; some at the Cleveland Foundation, some in schools. We start with a three-week training in August. [It covers] safety, filing, corporate luncheons, how to look others in the eye, how to give a good hand shake.

Conclusions: Leading in Cleveland’s diverse schools

Principals participating in the meeting had the opportunity to discuss similarities and differences in their schools and compare their leadership styles. All were leaders of relatively small schools, yet they spanned a range of grade levels, had different governance oversight (public, charter, parochial), access to different resources, and served different student populations. Many of the challenges they faced were based on these differences, yet there were striking similarities in the elements of leadership that contributed to their successes.

Repeatedly, these principals mentioned common themes when reflecting on their leadership:

- being mission driven,
- putting children first,
- reinforcing a strong, positive school culture,
- strongly supporting teachers,
- involving parents,

- taking the time to build relationships,
- engaging in continuous learning and improvement, and
- maintaining high standards in every aspect of the school enterprise.

Clearly, Cleveland Schools—public, charter, and parochial—have a wealth of strong role models when it comes to school leadership.