

# LEADERSHIP AT SCHOOL: HOW to Get the Job Done

BY JOE DIMARTINO AND SHERRI MILES

**C**ULTIVATING SCHOOL CHANGE REQUIRES STRONG LEADERSHIP. Effective principals know the value of observing reform strategies that are underway at similar schools, talking with other principals, and adapting innovative ideas to the needs of their own schools. Good principals work hard to empower their staff members and find ways to get multiple parties involved in supporting new ideas. As school leaders, they create and sell the message that the focus of any initiative is on students and student achievement. Although these principals are quick to note that collaboration makes success possible, an observer can easily see that it is the principal's vision, dedication, and determination that provides the mobilizing force behind any reform effort. What is it about the leadership qualities of these principals that makes change possible?

## Walk the Talk

The principals of Breakthrough High Schools (BTHS), like any group of principals, have a variety of leadership techniques for gathering the support of their colleagues during the complicated work of implementing new reform strategies at their schools. They share some personal leadership qualities, however, that seem to promote success across the board. First, in framing a vision for their schools, each principal was driven by deeply rooted care and concern for each of their students. Second, the principals had the ability to empathize with staff members when sharing the leadership for the vision; by their willingness and ability to understand the various viewpoints of others, the principals demonstrated an uncommonly high level of self-confidence. Third, implementing the strategies required them to become strong salespersons—initially for their ideas, but eventually for a collaboratively created vision for their school. Fourth, they had a strong work ethic and an almost-stubborn determination to succeed while maintaining a sense of calm and order in the face of often-bitter conflict.

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### All Students Can Achieve

Putting student needs first was at the heart of the vision at all the schools. At James Madison High School in San Diego, CA, Assistant Principals Barry Mangan and Jeff Luna said Virginia Eves has a focus on students and that “you see it every day.” Eves implemented a student recognition value system and has a belief in students that drives everything she does. She sets high expectations for herself and her staff members and has established guiding principles that she stands firmly by: all students can achieve, and all teachers need to embrace the fact that all students can achieve.

Secretary Bea McNair described Asenath Andrews of the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, MI, as dedicated, very creative, and sincere about girls completing their education. Her vision is consistent—it’s about the girls—and it motivates everything she does. For example, Andrews and her staff members see the same population of students drop out for various reasons every year; consequently, she created the Power Sisters group in an effort to try to keep these girls in school. “I can’t keep knowing this and not doing something about it. I know we lose these same kids. So I have known that for a while, and I have tried different things to hold them,” said Andrews. “It’s like knowing cigarettes are killing you, and you keep smoking. When there are some things we know about that’s going on in the school, but we don’t ever do anything about it, that’s a bad thing. You learn better and you do better.”

Laura Scuderi, secretary for Geraldine Ambrosio at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, NY, related a recent incident indicative of the principal’s personal qualities: a student who had been assigned to the twilight academy because she had difficulties during the regular school day asked to return to the regular program. The staff objected, but Ambrosio insisted on giving her one last chance. “[Ambrosio] is totally for the students and willing to stick her neck out in support of them,” said Scuderi. “Her vision is for more students succeeding and getting their diploma.”

For many of the principals, the movement to personalize their schools was driven by their focus on students and also informed by data. For example, James Campbell High School, once known as the lowest performing school in Hawaii, has been steadily improving for the past six years under the leadership of Gail Awakuni. “I looked at our data,” Awakuni said. “We had a failing school and we had students who were not achieving, and this is the same data for over 45 years. We couldn’t continue the same way; we have to do something.” Awakuni looked at research of what was needed and said, “Let’s just go for it and do it.”

### Empower Through Understanding

Principals need help in shaping the vision of how to personalize their school. Many initiatives are too dramatic to go forward just on the principal’s word. They require the support of many others. Obtaining this support requires principals to have the ability to understand others’ viewpoints and the self-confidence to allow other ideas to be seen as valuable. As Awakuni put it, “I have...what I call my ‘dream team teachers’—an exemplary group of teacher leaders. It empowers them to be teacher leaders.”

But empowering staff members first requires understanding them. Bea McNair, the secretary for Andrews (Catherine Ferguson Academy), summarized it this way, “She is empathetic and gives over 100%.” And at Poinciana High School in Kissimmee, FL, Debra Pace’s secretary reports that Pace accomplishes so much because “she treats everybody as though they matter—her biggest strength is empathizing and connecting with others. Relationships are built first so that she’s ready when something flares up. She strives to get to the bottom of issues.



All of the BTBS principals agree, students come first and are the heart of the school.

People leave her office better than when they went in. She understands how to connect with kids and can break through barriers.”

Jeff Luna, an assistant principal at James Madison, says that Eves is a great mentor: she is a “seasoned educator; [she has] great background with a willingness to share and help but leaves the final plan to me.” She is very into collaborative leadership, Luna reports, and her approach is to ask, “Here’s the problem. Now, what do we do?”

Empowering staff members was something Brian Shea accomplished during his first few years as principal at Roswell (NM) High School. He began with a goal that every incoming freshman would start out in Algebra 1. To do this, the students in the lower quartile had to be supported, so Shea added a 55-minute math lab each day.

The new program was a success. “My English department came to me and said, ‘We want to do sort of the same thing in English. We want to target those kids who are failing at this point, four-and-a-half weeks in,’” said Shea. “They were able to work out, through their own empowerment, a schedule where kids who are below a C would have after-school tutoring and/or a Saturday school session. This to me is a great breakthrough because they came to me. It was their idea, but it was important because they realized they needed to reach these kids. It is their program, and it’s for the children.”

Keith Morris, the principal of Mabton (WA) Junior/Senior High School, also believes in collaborative leadership. “The whole faculty was in on the decision to have an advisory program. The idea for creating advisories came from a core group of the teachers that were committed to making advisories work. And that’s what really made it fly,” said Morris. “Because I’m sure if it was a top-down decision—‘we’re going to do advisories’—it wouldn’t have worked that way.”

In El Monte, CA, Keith Richardson of Arroyo High School empowers staff members through a program called *vertical teaming*. Arroyo has five independent elementary districts that feed into the high school. Students were showing up at high school unprepared for the mandated English, algebra, and geometry testing. Richardson let the assistant principals at the feeder schools know what the high school goals were. “It was difficult at first,” said Richardson, “but what the feeder schools enjoy seeing is the data and the success rate and the grades and all of the information on the students they had previously.” Teachers in the high school go to the middle school and observe, do a walkthrough, or take a common lesson or project, and the middle school teacher and the high school teacher get together and evaluate it. “It isn’t really costing us money because I’m in the classroom subbing for that day, and it gets the two [groups of teachers] together,” said Richardson.

“I think you get a tremendous sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from envisioning something and creating a team and doing it,” said Kathleen Ponze, the principal at the Young Women’s Leadership School in New York City. “It’s very energizing and invigorating, and it makes everybody want to keep going forward.”

## Market Your Idea

Once a reform strategy is identified as a priority and staff members are empowered in the creation of the action plan,

## Leadership Behaviors of Effective Principals

Effective principals may have different approaches to achieving their goals, but they share many of the same leadership behaviors and qualities. Here is a list of characteristics the Breakthrough High Schools principals observed in one another during the 2005 Breakthrough High Schools: Focus on Leaders conference that was held in Arlington, VA.

### EFFECTIVE PRINCIPALS:

- Are student-oriented
- Have a clear focus on students
- Have a vision that is based upon a commitment to children
- Keep their eyes on the ball at all times; focus on student outcomes
- Are student-centered and value-driven
- Operate on the premise of doing what’s right for kids, even if it’s not easy
- Are passionate about students and their schools
- Believe that making it personal is a key to success
- Believe in students
- Believe that a rigorous curriculum, effective instructional strategies, and student support are critical elements of success
- Stress early intervention in grade 9
- Are supportive of staff members
- Have high expectations of staff members
- Are friendly, open, supportive, and helpful
- Believe in collaborative leadership
- Have a willingness to share ideas and materials
- Believe in staff members
- Have a commitment to community
- Value and appreciate teachers and find creative ways to express that appreciation and support them
- Are committed to the job
- Have a great work ethic
- Keep their eyes on the prize
- Have passion for the work
- Are diehards and not afraid of failure
- Bring money, programs, etc., to school and ensure that it’s aligned to the school’s vision and goals
- Know and accept the need to raise funds rather than relying on the district for financial or professional support
- Are very resourceful
- Are driven
- Are willing to do what others won’t
- Work long hours
- Have high expectations for self and school
- Have an inspiring personality
- Are empathetic
- Are modest, indulging in no egotistical behaviors
- Have a sense of urgency but also a sense of humor
- Are visionary and unafraid of stepping out of paradigms
- Are very strong instructional leaders who have well-developed support systems
- Are articulate
- Think outside of the box
- Never take no for an answer
- Are persistent
- Are risktakers
- Are creative problemsolvers

invariably many in the school and larger community will need to be convinced of the reason for the initiative. This requires that the principals become outspoken salespeople for the idea. Convincing the school community included numerous specific strategies across all the sites, but one strategy used by many of the sites was getting faculty members on board by visiting other schools. In that way, faculty members could see firsthand what a reform strategy looked like and speak with people who were working with it.

Both Morris of Mabton and Carmen Garcia of Edcouch-Elsa High School in Edcouch, TX, brought teams of teachers from their schools to visit other schools that had implemented advisories so appropriate decisions could be made about the design of an advisory program at their school. As Morris explained, “We went out and visited three different schools, one day at each school. So we got a feel for what we would like to see the advisory look like, and in some cases, what we didn’t want it to look like.”

Veronique Wills at Foshay Learning Center in Los Angeles, CA, convinced teachers to participate by reminding them that “every teacher has been to college, [which] means you can problem solve. That’s what I tell teachers, it means we can problem solve.” When teachers were asked to solve their problem in this way, they were happy to be part of the solution. Wills said, “Sometimes things come along and you have to change and look at things differently and change directions sometimes.”

Having all staff members engaged in conversations helps to market the vision. In the light of changing leadership roles within a school, instituting ways to have nearly total “buy-in” from the faculty can be key to the success of an initiative. Ambrosio (De Witt Clinton High School) summarized the need well when she stated, “You have to go through different areas to get people to do things, and the biggest thing is that within the teachers themselves, there’s leaders developing.” When Ambrosio divided her school of 4,500 into smaller learning communities, she acknowledged that it took long a long time to include the wider staff but that it was crucial to get the buy-in: “It’s something that you could do yourself and set up in a couple of hours, but you have to have people buy in. So it’s endless meetings, endless, endless.”

Andrews (Catherine Ferguson Academy) summarized the need to sell her ideas, “Marketing is the deal. It really is. You’ve got to do it. But you also have to have the staff that can do this work. If they don’t have that energy, if they’re not committed to it—like if the game leader is not a good leader—they’re giving the game away.”

### Be Determined to Succeed

In addition to being articulate spokespeople, the principals demonstrated positive yet stubborn determination in their attempts to accomplish their goals. Their work ethic often required many additional hours of effort and the ability to

alleviate the inevitable conflicts that arose. For example, no one could argue with Pace’s determination when she wanted to start the Poinciana Pride program at her school (Poinciana High School). She established a committee and did some intensive training during the summer. Then she asked the staff on the committee to sell it to the remainder of the staff. “Basically, we did that by looking at the data. When you show teachers that we had 8,200 discipline referrals in a year’s time, they understand and can recognize the disruption that that is to their teaching and learning environment, as well as to the safety of the campus.”

Pace worked hard to convince the students that she was serious about turning the school around. “I talked very candidly at the beginning of the year to the kids about what the reputation of the school was, and that when I first became the principal, people said, ‘Have you lost your mind?’ And I convinced every single one of them that I was there because I wanted to be there. And that I wanted them to want to be there.” She told the students, “The bottom line [is] I want this to be a school that you’re proud of, Poinciana Pride, and we’re going to set up these expectations. We’re going to reinforce you for doing them and then carry through.”

Glad Hatchell, the secretary at J. E. B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, VA, describes how the work ethic of Mel Riddile has created an atmosphere of respect: “He has very high expectations for everyone. [This has] created an enthusiasm for doing their jobs. Peer pressure for extra effort results from the fact that the chairs’ input is valued [here] more than anywhere else—he’s allowed the chairs to do the hiring for their departments. [They] have held out longer to fill vacancies than he would have, seeking the right fit. It has worked. There is no guessing on expectations. He is an enthusiastic salesman for his ideas. It’s obvious that he cares about everything that goes on in the school. He stays calm in conflict situations. He tries to handle conflict by analyzing the situation rationally.”

### Conclusion

When the principals of BTHS put the interests of students ahead of the interests of their schools, they saw how student achievement, staff morale, and their own job satisfaction improved tremendously. Being certain that the school is connecting with each student is clearly a strong motivator for them. The principals also share the belief that all students can learn—a value that is central to their efforts. Although the principals have shown that empathy, self-confidence, salesmanship, and a strong work ethic have enabled their schools to become outstanding examples of high achievement for all students, these leadership qualities are only effective if school leaders believe in their students. And at the center of all the work they do, the principals of BTHS truly believe in their students, showing how this guiding principle can make student success not just a goal, but a reality. **PL**