

The District's 'Ad-Vantage' Point

Disrupting the effects of poverty in all schools by exercising the authority invested in the central office

BY KATHLEEN M. BUDGE AND WILLIAM H. PARRETT

As we stood in the basement of the K-8 school looking at a sea of shrink-wrapped pallets containing unused workbooks, the principal explained, “Our central office continues to send them year after year. They know we use an alternative curriculum, but they still send them.”

Consistently outperforming the district and state on standardized tests, the school, located in a borough of New York City, uses a comprehensive reform model as its core curriculum — and has done so for nearly 10 years.

We are visiting this particular school of about 1,300 to interview

teachers and administrators about their remarkable success. When we asked how the central administration has supported the improvement efforts, the principal had escorted us to the basement to make the point. As we gazed at the stacks of unused workbooks, she described the laborious process she went through in the early years to return the workbooks. Now, she just stores them.

Ninety-seven percent of the students in this school are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and nearly 100 percent are children of color. Part of a large urban system, the school is not unlike many high-

poverty, high-performing schools that continue to beat the odds against student learning despite bureaucratic barriers and what might be considered benign neglect on the part of district leaders.

District Obstructions

When studying schools like these, nearly half of the principals we interviewed told us the schools’ accomplishments were achieved in spite of multiple challenges presented by their districts. Benign neglect was not the only form of the problem. It was not uncommon to hear principals describe how “staff churn” caused by

personnel transfer policies or reduction-in-force policies worked against their efforts to maintain the staff in which they had heavily invested.

In several cases that we heard, superintendents and other central-office personnel actively undermined principals' work to lead turnaround efforts. At times, professional jealousy from the public attention that had come to the school (and the principal) appeared to drive their actions. In other cases, district leaders appeared to resent the pressure they received from school boards to "fix" the other schools in the district.

Sometimes other principals coerced district leaders to pressure the outlier school "to get back in line" because it made their efforts look bad in comparison. In a few circumstances, the situation was complicated by what appeared to be discrimination or prejudice toward the principal on the basis of race or gender.

In too many school districts, high-performing, high-poverty schools present the "threat of a good example." They rock the boat of mediocrity and challenge the stereotypes of people who live in poverty, stereotypes deeply entrenched in our schools and the broader society. A few principals stick it out in unsupportive places, but many leave to find a district that will not only support the work they want to do serving the needs of students who live in poverty but also champion it.

Sink or Swim

In too many districts, high-poverty schools are left to sink or swim in an organizational culture of systemic blame. Superintendents and central-office personnel blame ineffective principals for their lack of leadership, principals blame ineffective teachers for not reaching and teaching all students, and educators in these contexts blame students and their families for students' failure to learn.

Supporting high-poverty schools requires a commitment to equity.



In the Pass Christian, Miss., School District, the elementary and middle schools share a media center, cafeteria, gym and courtyard. The facility was built in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

It is not uncommon to find strong reluctance from district leaders unwilling to risk losing the support of the middle-class stakeholder base by, for example, redistributing resources equitably based on student need (rather than equally) among schools. And in some districts, leaders continue to believe not much can be expected from "those kids" in the poorest schools, so why invest a lot of time and effort on them, particularly if their parents and caregivers have little agency to challenge the status quo.

Nonetheless, there are many district leaders who do support these schools and many more who would be willing to support the high-poverty schools in their districts. They just aren't sure how best to do so.

Working Smarter

In the past decade, research has begun to provide insight into the district's role in supporting high performance throughout the entire school system. In our book *Turning*

High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools, we take an inside-out look at effective practices at the school level that have implications for leadership at the district level.

We present a framework for providing guidance and support to leaders from various vantage points in the system. Leaders in these schools develop the leadership capacity to foster a healthy, safe and supportive learning environment and to support a relentless focus on learning — not only student learning but also school professionals' learning and the school itself getting smarter about the way it does business (system learning). District leaders can support this work in many and varied ways.

Consider the examples found in Pass Christian, Miss., and Jennings, Mo. Although both districts are small in comparison to most urban districts, they are larger or comparable in size to more than 70 percent of the school districts nationwide.

Beth John, superintendent of the 2,000-student Pass Christian School

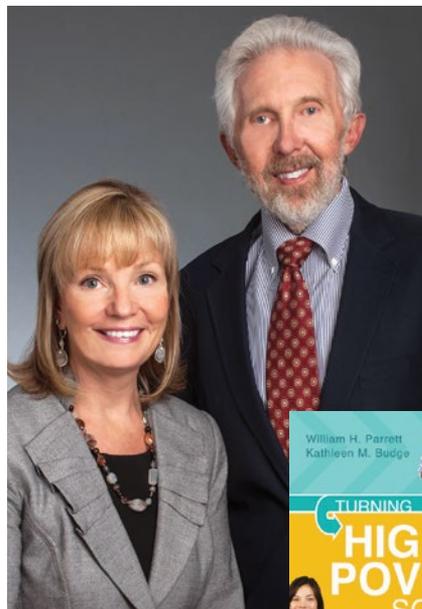
District, understands the importance of supporting the work of site-based leaders in high-poverty schools. Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed or damaged nearly every building in the community, John, then curriculum director, gathered together administrators and other leaders in makeshift tents outside of the remains of DeLisle Elementary School as there were no usable school buildings at the time. They began rebuilding the district from the ground up, both literally and philosophically.

Making a “commitment to excellence” their mission, the district has seen proficiency rates steadily climb for more than a decade. Two-thirds of the district’s student body qualifies for free or reduced-price meals, yet the district’s graduation rate is 89 percent (the state average is 76 percent) and achievement gaps are small or non-existent. Three of the four schools in the district are Blue Ribbon winners and the fourth is not far behind. The high school, recently ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as No. 1 in the state, was awarded the Dispelling the Myth award from the Education Trust in 2013.

Today, John and Meridith Bang, the district’s curriculum director, continue to focus on developing the instructional leadership capacity of the principals and teacher leaders. Additionally, they support the improvement of teaching and learning in each school by building opportunities into the school calendar for ongoing data analysis at both the school and district levels, as well as horizontal and vertical alignment of the Common Core standards to the local curriculum.

Reprioritizing Spending

When Tiffany Anderson became superintendent in Jennings, Mo., three years ago, she says she and her team at the district office used the “tools of the school district to alleviate barriers



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ers poverty creates.” Of the district’s 3,000 students, 90 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Although the district was at risk of losing accreditation when she arrived, meeting only 57 percent of the state’s standards, in 2015, the district met 81 percent and is now fully accredited.

District leaders have fostered a healthy, safe and supportive learning culture by operating a food bank; remodeling a district building to provide a homeless shelter (Hope House) for students; opening a clothing boutique to provide free coats, socks, undergarments, and other necessities; offering classes for parents and caregivers; and installing washers and dryers in each of the district’s eight schools. Families are welcome to use the washers and dryers in exchange for one hour of volunteer work in the school. A pediatrician also is available to provide medical care at the schools.

Jennings has accomplished all of this by reprioritizing their expenditures, such as closing two low-enrollment schools and cutting administrative positions. In addition, they

have formed strategic partnerships, obtained grant funding and received philanthropic contributions.

Exercise of Authority

Those who lead from the vantage point of the district office can provide a critically needed source of support. District leaders often have authority to remove bureaucratic barriers that many, if not most, principals do not. They are in a better position to form partnerships with external stakeholders to leverage resources to provide seamless systems of support for students and families who live in poverty.

Moreover, it is within the power of system leaders to redesign the role of the district office first and foremost to be of service to their schools. This is best addressed by developing instructional leadership capacity in principals and teacher leaders. This vantage point is an “advantage” that all district leaders should deploy to disrupt poverty’s adverse impact on learning.

District-level leaders who take advantage of their vantage point to support high-poverty schools join those schools in owning the challenges. They share responsibility for improving teaching and learning by holding themselves accountable for increasing principals’ instructional leadership skills, committing to equity in policy and practice, and considering the budget a moral document reflective of their mission to ensure better outcomes for all of their students. ■

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