



# Tough Questions for Tough Times

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In high-poverty schools, leaders can find the right answers to raising student achievement—when they start with the right questions.

"It's cool to do well at Granger," exclaimed a 16-year-old we interviewed during a break in her daily advisory meeting. "It didn't used to be that way here, my sister told me ... but that's all different now. I'm hoping to go to the university in two years!"

Located in Washington State's rural Yakima Valley, Granger High School serves 388 mostly Hispanic students, 89 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Over the past eight years, the school's 10th grade reading performance has steadily climbed from fewer than 20 percent of students meeting Washington state standards to nearly 80 percent. Parent attendance at student conferences has grown from a dismal 10 percent to almost 100 percent, and the graduation rate has soared to over 89 percent. As the staff's expectations of and relationships with students have grown, everything about the school has improved.

Two thousand miles to the east, in Saint Paul, Minnesota, 341 elementary students parade through the impoverished neighborhood surrounding Dayton's Bluff Elementary School. They're celebrating having accomplished their goal of reading a million words in the past year. "Twenty-five books read this year by each of our students, and we're letting our community know about it!" proudly proclaims Principal Andrew Collins, who leads the K–6 march with a bullhorn, while the students follow with noisemakers and banners.

Dayton's Bluff has risen from being the lowest-performing elementary school in Saint Paul—and one of the lowest-performing in Minnesota—to becoming a school in which nearly 70 percent of students meet or surpass state standards in reading and 75 percent meet or surpass state standards in math.

## From Low- to High-Performing

These schools demonstrate that it's possible not only to reverse historic trends of underachievement but also to sustain their gains. So how did they do it?

Leaders in schools like Granger and Dayton's Bluff began their remarkable turnarounds by making tough calls—and many of those decisions were about how to use resources. The budget in a high-performing, high-poverty school is a *moral document*, reflective of the school's beliefs about the conditions necessary to sustain success for all students and the adults who serve them. As budgets constrict, school leaders maintain their success by working collaboratively with staff to stay focused on the priorities that guide their work. They know that cuts in critical resources can jeopardize their hard-won gains. Countering these challenges becomes their top leadership priority.

On the basis of a growing body of knowledge that has emerged from the research on school effects (Teddle & Stringfield, 1993), coupled with more recent analyses of strategies that have guided hundreds of schools in their successful efforts to reverse historic trends of underachievement (Barr & Parrett, 2006; Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Chenowith, 2007; Duke, 2007), we initiated a study seeking to understand how school leaders' actions influence a turnaround in low-performing schools.

In addition to Granger High and Dayton's Bluff, we visited four other high-performing/high-poverty schools: Taft Elementary in Boise, Idaho; P.S./M.S. 124, an elementary school in Queens, New York; Lapwai Elementary on the Nez Perce Reservation in northern Idaho; and Port Chester Middle School in Port Chester, New York. Despite high levels of poverty in their communities, these schools have sustained improvements on multiple measures of student success (achievement test scores, graduation rates, attendance rates, and behavior measures); and national and state organizations have recognized and honored them for their achievements.

An important message reverberates from these successes: A school can indeed overcome the powerful and pervasive effects of poverty on a student's learning. Sustained improvements usually began with an individual or a small group of leaders committed to equity and the goal of successfully teaching every student.

## Asking the Right Questions

The economic downturn and the recent passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act confront many district and school leaders with the confounding paradox of managing both recession-driven budget cuts and new stimulus funding intended to improve the achievement of underserved students.

Leaders in high-performing/high-poverty schools begin by asking questions. The questions leaders ask fall into three interrelated domains: (1) building the necessary leadership capacity; (2) focusing the staff's everyday core work on student, professional, and system learning; and (3) creating and fostering a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment for all. In tough times like these, their questions may provide valuable guidance for other school leaders facing their own challenges and opportunities.

### Questions About Leadership

#### ***Do we have a data system that works for classroom and school leaders?***

All schools in the study have implemented data systems to guide their work. In fact, using data-based decision making was one of the two most common explanations offered for the schools' success. (The other was fostering caring relationships.)

Professional development in using data-based decision making, coupled with establishing measurable goals and developing aggressive time lines to achieve them, is vital to sustaining Lapwai Elementary's success. Concerned about the quality and level of teacher-parent communications, Lapwai staff members decided to set a schoolwide goal to have weekly contacts with families. They held themselves accountable by reporting their contacts to the principal, Teri Wagner, who shared the data at the district's board of trustees meetings.

#### ***Are we eliminating policies and practices that manufacture low achievement?***

Research on the negative effects of low expectations, inequitable funding, retention, tracking, and mis-assignment to special education are well documented. All the schools studied confronted such policies and practices.

When Richard Esparza came to Granger High as principal 10 years ago, changing beliefs about students' potential was foundational to all the other actions he took. He began by modeling his belief in students' ability to meet high academic standards and by stating that he expected the faculty to believe the same thing. He worked with teachers to eliminate a bell-curve mentality—accepting that some students will fail—and a policy of one-chance testing. Instead, students who fall below a C in their coursework are now required to get extra help, and they can retake tests until they earn a C or better.

#### ***Have we extended learning time for underachieving students?***

Underachieving students living in poverty require more instructional time to catch up to their higher-achieving peers. All high-performing/high-poverty schools find a way to extend learning time for students who need it. The schools offer a blend of before- and after-school tutoring, weekend and vacation catch-up sessions, summer school and full-day kindergarten, and sheltered classroom support. At Queens's P.S./M.S. 124, for example, school is in session "pretty much five and a half days per week," according to principal Valarie Lewis. On Saturday mornings, middle school students who need to catch up attend small learning academies.

#### ***Have we reorganized time to better support professional learning?***

Eighty percent of a district's or school's budget is typically allocated toward personnel; becoming a high-performing school therefore requires making significant investments in people. Schools must find their own ways to reorganize time to support the development of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). They can repurpose time traditionally set aside for faculty meetings, reorganize the schedule to accommodate common planning time, bank time for professional development, or locate funds for ongoing release time.

At Dayton's Bluff Elementary, grade-level teams of teachers use release time to review classroom-based assessment data, discuss instructional strategies, and plan for each upcoming six-week period. As teachers discuss individual students' performance and specific teaching strategies, the school's literacy coach and a district-level instructional coach look on and take part. By participating in collaborative planning sessions, coaches are better able to provide just-in-time support.

### Questions About Learning

#### ***Does our instructional framework guide curriculum, teaching, assessment, and the learning climate?***

Leaders in the schools we studied credit much of their success to a high level of instructional program coherence. Several of the schools began their improvement efforts by adopting a comprehensive school reform model. For example, P.S./M.S. 124 selected Core Knowledge, whose framework emphasizes building students' knowledge base in world history, geography, civics, literature, science, art, and music. Schools customized the reform models to better fit their needs. Finding the content to be "too Eurocentric," teachers at P.S./M.S. 124 have added content relating to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In addition, they have incorporated knowledge about the various ethnicities and cultures represented in their student body.

### ***Do we have common assessments, and do we embrace assessment literacy?***

High-performing/high-poverty schools establish clear learning targets and engage their students in activities that help them acquire assessment literacy. These activities include selecting individual learning benchmarks, compiling portfolios, making public presentations of work, completing reflective revisions, and participating in student-led conferences.

Leaders in the Lapwai School District use professional learning time to focus on developing assessment literacy and common classroom-based assessments. At Granger High, the initiation of student-led conferences not only improved students' understanding of their own learning, but also significantly improved parents' attendance rates at their child's conferences.

### ***Are all students proficient in reading?***

Second only to safety, ensuring that all students develop literacy skills became a priority in most of the schools we studied. Designing a comprehensive approach to reading improvement may entail conducting an analysis of students' unique needs (for example, those of English language learners); developing an understanding of the influence of poverty on reading achievement (Neuman, 2008); and examining the research base, especially concerning adolescent literacy (see Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008).

All teachers at Port Chester Middle School consider themselves to be English language arts teachers. To sell this idea, school leaders began by helping teachers understand that students' inability to read proficiently was a significant barrier to learning the content the teachers were attempting to teach. Now all teachers teach 24 bundled key reading and writing skills.

### ***Do we provide targeted interventions?***

The schools we studied use data to identify students who need before-, during-, and after-school small-group and individual tutoring; self-paced interventions using technology; one-on-one academic advising and coaching; homework support; or additional assessment time.

Taft Elementary in Idaho focuses on developing literacy skills early. The school offers full-day kindergarten and keeps class sizes small. In addition to the district-adopted reading program, Taft assesses the proficiency of all students and, if necessary, assigns students to one of three different reading interventions that provide different approaches to literacy learning.

## **Questions About the Learning Environment**

### ***Is our school safe?***

In all the schools studied, particularly the secondary schools, leaders emphasized safety for students and staff as a prerequisite for learning. At Port Chester Middle School, principal Carmen Macchia explained, "In the beginning ... kids would hold their bladders all day out of fear of what might happen to them in the bathrooms." The school established structures, such as the frequent presence of school staff in bathrooms and hallways, to help students become accountable for their actions. The staff's expectations and modeling of appropriate behavior and other good citizenship practices encouraged students to help promote school safety, which authentically contributed to changing students' perspectives from one of "ratting out" their friends to one of civic responsibility to their school.

### ***Do we understand the influence of poverty on student learning?***

Although the concept of a culture of poverty has been refuted (Gorski, 2008), too many educators continue to believe that people who live in poverty share a common set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (such as a poor work ethic, alcohol or drug abuse, and apathy toward school). To counter these myths, leaders in the schools we studied use data and research to support high expectations of students. An ethos of professional accountability for learning is tangible in all the participating schools, in contrast to schools that blame students and families for poor achievement.

When Taft Elementary School welcomed more than 60 refugee students one year from 16 different countries, principal Susan Williamson knew the importance of developing an understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic characteristics of the refugee students' families (Budge & Parrett, 2009). Enlisting the help of a former refugee whom the refugee community trusted, Susan and a small team of teacher leaders conducted multiple visits to each student's home. Although the purpose of these visits was to invite students to a two-week summer camp designed to familiarize the students with Taft and foster friendships, the visits also helped teachers gain a much better understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic influences on these students' lives.

### ***Have we fostered a bond between students and school?***

The high-performing/high-poverty schools we studied provided "protective factors" that help build a bond between students and school. Paramount among these factors is promoting caring relationships between adults and students as well as among peers.

Although Granger is a small high school serving only 388 students, many students felt disconnected from school. Former principal Esparza's focus on personalization led the staff to reorganize the school day to include a well-designed advisory program. All professional staff members, including the principal, advise a small group of 18–20 students four days each week and stay with those students for four years, navigating their path toward graduation and beyond. The advisory teacher regularly reviews each student's progress through school-generated biweekly reports, holding students accountable for staying on track. Advisors identify any student who falls behind and work with the student's teachers to intervene. "It's all about relationships with the kids," explained current principal Paul Chartrand, "and the advisory program is key to our continued success."

Other high-performing/high-poverty schools provide additional protective factors, such as restructuring into small learning communities and removing economic barriers to participation in various extracurricular activities. Some schools work to counter the adverse effects of student mobility by dedicating staff to the task of welcoming and placing new students.

### ***Do we engage parents, families, and the community?***

High-performing/high-poverty schools do not go it alone. Instead, they build positive and productive relationships with students' families and the broader neighborhood and community. In partnership with the city of Saint Paul and the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, Dayton's Bluff Elementary provides students and families with a recreational facility and the services of a nurse-practitioner, dentist, and social worker at the school.

Leaders in the schools we studied engage stakeholders in various ways—for example, hiring a school/family/community liaison, offering adult mentoring and community service learning programs, ensuring two-way communication between the school and the family, and using the school as a community center.

## **Tough Decisions, Tough Times**

Leaders in the six schools we studied expressed confidence that the processes they had in place would guide their decisions regarding the use of possible stimulus funding. The principals voiced concern for two top priorities: (1) maintaining and perhaps adding staff, because keeping personnel is key to a low student-teacher ratio and caring relationships in school; and (2) providing targeted support to the students who need it most. "Target the lowest-performing kids," cautioned one principal, "even if the stimulus money doesn't last forever."

Leaders in high-performing/high-poverty schools recognize their efforts and successes as a continuing journey. Whether surviving budget cuts, carefully targeting new stimulus funding, or both, leaders in all schools may benefit from reflecting on the questions leaders ask in high-performing/high-poverty schools to support and sustain student success.

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