

Principles of Leadership-*Good Principals Know all Children can Learn and Grow*

"There may be schools out there that have strong instructional leaders, but are not yet effective; however, we have yet to find an effective school that did not have a strong instructional leader as the principal." --Ron Edmonds, author of *The Effective Schools Movement*.

WOODBIDGE The research of Ron Edmonds in the 1980s changed the rules of the game in education forever.

Prior to Edmonds' research, the convention of the day stated that the cause for poor educational performance was a child's lack of foundational knowledge and family support. Much of that thinking was based on the research findings of the James Coleman Report ("Equality in Educational Opportunity") in 1966, followed by similar results published six years later by Christopher Jenks. Both studies concluded that schools had little influence on student achievement. Instead the supposition was that a child's family was the major determinant.

Edmonds went about the business of finding schools that contradicted the Coleman and Jenks findings. He found many schools in minority, low-income areas where students were performing or outperforming their middle-class, white schools counterparts.

Among Edmonds' findings, he revealed that these schools had strong instructional leaders.

Edmonds' research confirmed what I had known for quite some time: There are students out there, like me, who can perform academically in spite of coming from homes where parents do not have the educational skills to provide support at home. I grew up during the *Brown v. Board of Education* era. Nothing changed for me when that ruling was handed down by the high court.

One would think that Edmonds' research would have changed the paradigm in how education treats those who come to the schoolhouse doors from less-than-affluent families. Yet more than 25 years later we are still lamenting the low performance of poor, minority children. Why?

Because many educators still hold on to the earlier Coleman and Jenks findings. They are still playing the home-and-parent blame game. In fact, one of the only reasons there has been some positive change in student performance in low-income, minority schools is because of the recent change in focus by various states in their accreditation standards. School accreditation is now linked to student performance. Private businesses have operated this way for years.

No Child Left Behind, in spite of some of its shortcomings, has forced educators to be more accountable for all students. Yet by all accounts, the highest performing schools are still those in middle-class, white environments.

There are, however, pockets of high-performing schools with low-income, minority students as their clients. Here is what makes the difference:

- **Principals as Learning Leaders:** This is the term used by Richard DuFour in his *Professional Learning Community* research. The difference in the "instructional leader" and the "learning leader" is that the latter is focused on whether learning is taking place. He or she monitors instruction, but is more concerned about the results of that instruction. Prior to Edmonds' research, educators received the data reports but it did not always change their practice. In high-performing schools, data results -- not guesswork -- guide instructional practices.
- **Personal Mission:** Successful principals know that personal mission has to precede school mission. My personal mission for high student achievement makes it easy for me to require the same commitment from my staff. My personal mission is to unlock the talents of children with less-than-privileged backgrounds similar to mine. A strong personal mission always trumps the need for personal approval from teachers. It is so easy to shift the focus to pleasing the adults instead of making decisions that are in the best interests of

children. In the end, teachers admire principals with strong purpose. Edmonds says that we "know all that we need to know" about how children learn. The question is whether we have the will to change our practices to fit the needs of the young minds we must shape.

- **High Expectations of Students:** High-performing schools embrace accountability for learning. They believe that lack of academic experience and/or home support may slow down the learning process for select students, but they do not allow it to control their beliefs about these students' ability to learn. They embrace what the researchers call the "J" curve instead of the bell curve. They expect and demand high performance. They move students from the bottom of the curve to the top of the "J." Principals in high-performing schools say to their students, "You will not fail on my watch." They do not use a student's background as an excuse for low expectations.
- **Dispersed Leadership:** Principals in high-performing schools know that sustainability is important, so they build leadership from within. Principals in these schools know that no one of the educators in a building is as smart as all of them. They will have the "vision thing" down pat -- but know that it has to be a shared vision with a full buy-in.
- **Student Efficacy:** Students must play a vital role in their own learning. They need to know that not only do they have the ability to learn, but they must take ownership of their own success -- and that failure is not an option. Principals and teachers in high-performing schools involve students in self-assessment and goal setting. Test-taking skills, for example, become a teaching genre. Developing meta-cognitive skills -- leaning to think for yourself -- is the norm in high-achieving schools.

In the end it has little if anything to do with how much money we pump into our schools -- and more to do with our beliefs, expectations, and how we monitor growth. Lillie Jessie is the principal of Elizabeth Vaughan Elementary School in Prince William.

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TIMES-DISPATCH GUEST COLUMNIST: Sunday November 4,2007

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