

# Overview

RON BRANDT

Ronald S. Brandt  
Executive Editor

Nancy S. Olson  
Senior Editor

Anne Dees  
Managing Editor

Anita Wiley  
Art Director

Nancy Carter Modrak  
Associate Editor

Teola T. Jones  
Advertising Manager

Virginia A. Flynn  
Editorial Assistant

Gayle Crossland  
Publications Secretary

FEBRUARY 1982

VOLUME 39

NUMBER 5

*Educational Leadership* is intended for all persons interested in curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in education. The contents, including advertising, are the expressions of the writers and not necessarily a statement of policy of the Association. Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.

ISSN 0013-1784



What does it take to change a high school where crime and vandalism flourish and learning founders? What kind of leadership can transform such a school into a model environment where people are well-dressed and proud, where cigarettes and drugs are seldom seen, and where students fired up by academic pep rallies score well on state tests of basic skills?

Walter Harris achieved those changes in just three years as principal of all-black Ribault High School in Jacksonville, Florida. Tireless and determined, Harris lived up to the school's motto, "Keep on comin' on." He was at school 14 to 16 hours a day, roaming the halls, talking with students and teachers, setting the tone. His rigid enforcement of tough new dress and discipline codes didn't alienate students because it was tempered by warmth and humor.

A good story teller, Harris recalls hiding in an unused ticket booth several mornings in a row to catch unwary smokers. "I'd take a few every day and come back for more the next. I told them, 'It's just like a good fishing hole. As long as they're biting, I'll keep coming back.'" Harris tells of visitors shaking their heads when they heard he had ordered trees and shrubs cut down so students wouldn't have a place to hide and smoke. Seeing the single-entrance chain-link fence he had erected around the campus they would ask, "Doesn't that bother you?" "It sure does," he would answer with a twinkle in his eye. "I wish it was five feet higher with a lot more barbed wire on top."

Shaping up discipline, though impressive, would have been pointless without also raising achievement. There, too, Ribault made remarkable progress, especially in the percentage of juniors passing state mathematics tests.

Ribault's turnaround is matched by other accomplishments of the Duval County Schools. Behavior is better throughout the system; parent participation is up; there is abundant evidence of community support. And test scores—all test scores—have risen every year for five years straight. Obviously, things are going well.

Much of the credit clearly goes to

superintendent Herb Sang, appointed in 1976. For example, Harris concluded at the end of his first year that too many teachers were negative and apathetic because they disliked teaching at Ribault. He notified the entire staff that they might not return in the fall; they could ask for a transfer or could reapply to teach at Ribault. When school reopened, 54 teachers—about 2/3 of the staff—were new. That kind of action would have been impossible without strong backing from the superintendent.

Sang's disciples say he, unlike some administrators, is keenly interested in student learning. He insists on higher test scores, helps plan curriculum changes, takes a personal interest in problem schools. For example, he attended some of the academic pep rallies at Ribault. Harris says whatever Sang does, "He gives it all he's got."

Sang's detractors say he demands loyalty and will not tolerate dissent. They say he publicly chastized teachers for "not doing their jobs" and privately threatened to bar student teachers from a nearby university because its professors were critical. His support from business is said to be the result of "giving them what they want." A few skeptics may have such reservations, but the vast majority of citizens, teachers, and students apparently like Sang's approach. Even the skeptics concede that education in Jacksonville is vastly improved.

Walter Harris is now an assistant superintendent. Although his actions at Ribault may have given a different impression, Harris pictures himself as something of a liberal, or at least a "pluralist." Because of that, he expected occasional arguments with Sang, an avowed conservative. Instead, he found they generally agreed on what should be done.

That seems to show that leader effectiveness depends on the situation. Suppose the board of education had picked a different superintendent in 1976. Someone less single-minded might not have acted so decisively and might have failed to kindle the enthusiasm needed for Jacksonville's rejuvenation. A staff member told me, "Herb Sang is right for this system at this time." ■

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.