

# Three Principals Who Make a Difference

*A close-up look at three transformative leaders in action shows that although they come in different shapes and sizes, they share one thing: exemplary schools.*

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**W**hy do some schools succeed when others fail? This question has driven reform for generations. In recent years, organizational structure and culture — in particular, shared decision making and teacher empowerment — have been touted as major determinants of effectiveness.

But is decentralization alone the magic elixir?

Our research suggests *no* — at least, not without transformational leadership from the principal. The issue is more than simply who

makes which decisions. Rather, it is finding a way to be successful in collaboratively defining the essential purpose of teaching and learning and then empowering the entire school community to become energized and focused. In schools where such a focus had been achieved, we found that teaching and learning became transformative for everyone involved.

## Three Key Features

In helping the faculties at more than 50 schools with Collaborative Action Research (Sagor 1991), we've noticed an interesting trend. In schools where teachers and students report a culture conducive to school success,

a transformative leader is the principal. These principals consistently use what we call the three "building blocks of transformational leadership":

1. *A clear and unified focus.* Developing a

*Opinionated, assertive "Clyde"*

common focus doesn't occur through spontaneous generation. Rather, a leader usually serves as the medium through which the collective yearnings of a group of empowered professionals can take form and give direction for both group and individual work (Peters and Waterman 1982).

2. *A common cultural perspective.* It's important for teachers to view their organization through a similar lens. In our work, we ask teachers to rate 14 elements of their school culture that are known to influence performance (Saphier and King 1985). In schools where teachers share a common view of their school's culture, improvement seems to occur more easily than in those where teachers disagree on issues such as the degree of collegiality among the staff or the importance of risk-taking and experimentation.

3. *A constant push for improvement.* Our research supports Fullan's (1986) belief in the importance of the simultaneous application of pressure and support during educational change. We studied schools where despite significant financial and emotional support from district and building administration, the direction of improvement was disappointing. Meanwhile, other schools that received less support were making impressive gains. Likewise, we encountered settings where expectations were high, yet performance was low. The secret seemed to be in providing the right combination of pressure to improve, along with meaningful support for the improvement initiatives themselves.



To understand the role leaders play in developing and sustaining these important features, let's look at three very different principals who have one thing in common: they oversee exemplary schools marked by heightened student and faculty morale, as well as high and improving student performance.<sup>1</sup>

### **An Opinionated, Assertive Principal**

Clyde Adams had successfully led two large high schools and two middle schools in other districts when he came to Wilton Middle School, a tradition-bound, highly regarded, yet physically dilapidated school. At Wilton, students' scores had historically been high, faculty turnover low, and a culture of self-confidence and professional esteem ran as deep as the layers of paint that covered the old wooden building. The teachers were so sure of themselves that many nodded agreement with the comment, "This school runs itself; we don't even need a principal."

Clyde, a large, athletically built, middle-aged man, didn't subscribe to their view. While he held the staff's accomplishments in esteem, his review of the data showed that not all Wilton students were achieving academic success, that there was still much work to be done.

On the surface, Clyde personifies the classical masculine leadership model: self-assured, direct, and personally formidable. When we started studying Wilton, I'd have bet that a self-confident, self-actualized professional teaching staff like Wilton's, with a long history of success, would have put such a leader in his place — and quickly!

If that prediction seems harsh, consider this: Clyde came to the school deeply opposed to tracking.

Yet the senior faculty members were equally committed to maintaining ability grouping and, further, considered it a chief reason for the school's success.

Clyde began work in July. By August, it became apparent that the maintenance department would not get to his building before school started.

### **If Clyde cuts the image of the classically masculine leader, Nora presents a sharp contrast: she is a nurturer, a listener, and a supporter of faculty, students, and parents.**

That didn't faze Clyde. He promptly donned overalls and, with the building custodian, painted the staff room, the cafeteria, and other areas in the school. He scrounged carpet and draperies. On the day after Labor Day, the staff found a warm and hospitable lounge to work in.

During the summer, Clyde hired six new faculty members, a number equaling 20 percent of the faculty. They were young, enthusiastic, and hardworking. During the hiring and induction process, Clyde informed the new staff that from day one he wanted them actively involved in school decisions. However, the veterans were not to be left out. They were already accustomed to full involvement in governance. Clyde's agenda was to

expand and systematize the faculty's role in decision making. He explained his approach this way:

Every staff member is involved in a group or committee while we are working toward consensus. Once groups are established, we can make changes and decide on beliefs. Faculty meetings provide an opportunity to bring together all the small committees. I like to let people try out ideas and am willing to allow for failure.

Thus, the year began with Clyde, the new faculty, and the veterans deliberating on school goals, beliefs, strategies, and visions. Not surprisingly, tracking quickly emerged as an area of disagreement. What surprised us was that the issue didn't generate the rancor we expected. The key appeared to be Clyde's approach to leadership.

Several times during our visits to Wilton, we witnessed a pattern of principal-teacher interaction. Clyde would use some data (test scores, attendance reports, surveys) to raise perplexing questions. The meetings would then take on a tone of excited inquiry, "What if we tried . . . ?" or "Could we find out if . . . ?" Then, without hesitation, Clyde would grant whatever support was requested. And he never let the faculty deal itself any grunt work. If data had to be obtained, graphed, or sorted, he'd say, "That's our job in the office. You don't need to waste your time on it!"

The Wilton faculty held their home-room program in high regard. Upon arrival, Clyde formed his own home-room group of the most at-risk, marginal kids in the school. His goal was to make them successful students. He also created his own basketball team comprising the kids least likely to ever try out for or make an interscholastic athletic team. His team was

soon challenging the faculty, the varsity, and all comers to good-natured, competitive games.

"Action research," Clyde told us, "is a way of sharing power." Not surprisingly, when the time came to find a focus for inquiry, Wilton's action research team chose tracking and its impact on attitude and achievement. Every participant came to the research project with deep biases. Half of the team was certain tracking was the source of the school's success; the other half thought it was holding them back. Did this produce hostility and divisiveness? Not at Wilton. At this school, it became a justification for inquiry, professional debate, and data-based decision making.

At Wilton the teachers work hard, work together, and work for the kids. In the words of a beginning teacher, "Teachers share ideas and concepts and work together formally and informally for the good of the school." Another teacher commented, "We open our big mouths all the time. There is no fear here about saying what's on your mind."

The work ethic was captured by a member of the action research team, who confided, "We're buried right now. On the edge of burnout, but there is celebration. We're stressed, but I guess if we laugh enough, our sense of humor keeps us ready to go again the next year."

At year-end, Clyde was firmly established and well liked by the faculty, although self-confidence

would still cause many teachers to agree that "this school could run without a principal." Recently the faculty amicably agreed to replace tracking with heterogeneous grouping. School goals, recently revised, now have a focus on the disadvantaged learner. In addition, the faculty created a paid academic coaching position to work with failing students after school in the same manner as the athletic coaches.

Did opinionated, assertive Clyde direct that these changes be made? No. Would they have occurred without him? We suspect not.

### A Nurturing, Supportive Principal

Like Clyde, Nora Burns is a veteran principal. Two years ago she had been given the opportunity to realize a dream: open a new elementary school. For a

year Nora served as planning principal and as the district personnel director. To argue that Nora avoided using her position to construct an incredible faculty for Bedrock would be to sell this warm, soft-spoken grandmother short. Nora has a reputation for being able to get what she needs and wants. But the secret of Nora's success doesn't appear to be traditional power politics!

If Clyde cuts the image of the classically masculine leader, Nora presents a sharp contrast: she is a nurturer, a listener, and a supporter of faculty, students, and parents. Over the years, top teachers in her district repeatedly requested and received transfers to the buildings where Nora was principal, and weaker ones sought transfers out. When asked about this trend, Nora seems unwilling to acknowledge that she has anything to do with it. But when we observed her and talked to the teachers, her leadership became apparent.

Nora doesn't lecture, nor does she challenge. Rather, she is all over the building, finding the good things that are happening for kids and openly delighting in them. The responsible teacher's excitement is then visibly amplified by her enthusiasm, encouragement, and offers of assistance. When Nora later suggests an idea for consideration, it is taken as advice from a sage friend. Something in her demeanor tells you that while Bo may



*Nurturing, supportive "Nora"*

know sports, Nora knows instruction! Even so, she readily admits to being a learner. One of the things she enjoys most about her job is that "I'll never know it all, so I'm always looking for better things to do." Consequently, she affords others the opportunity to lead. In fact, many faculty members acknowledge her instructional coordinator (the district's equivalent of an intern) as the school's instructional leader. Her success in cultivating and developing leadership is evident in the fact that three of the other five elementary principals in her district once worked for Nora as either instructional coordinators or teachers.

Nora insisted, and faculty interviews corroborated, that hiring decisions were not based upon a commitment to certain educational practices. However, everyone agreed they were conditioned on adherence to certain core values. Specifically, Nora sought teachers who had inquiring minds, a commitment to collaboration, and a belief in child-centered education. When this new group convened at a summer retreat to plan the program and chose multi-aged grouping as their organizational structure (something unprecedented in the district), observers might have suspected a setup: Nora's support for that innovative practice was already well known. Were these people hired because of a predisposition toward multi-aged grouping? Not so, argued the faculty. Nora offered them data and provided reading material for consideration, but the decision to implement was theirs alone.

In September 1990, 8 of the 12 Bedrock teachers signed on as an "action research" team charged by their colleagues with documenting the impact of multi-aged grouping on all aspects of the program. A large staff-parent advisory committee was also formed to help guide the school. At

first, the parents (many upper-middle class professionals who selected the community because of its academic reputation) were suspicious of this new organizational structure, and the teachers were understandably defensive about the parents' critical attitude. Not Nora. She simply saw this as an opportunity to educate.

Bedrock is a school, albeit new, that swims in data. Every question posed by a parent or a teacher is affirmed as appropriate. When challenged, Nora

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never shows the least defensiveness; instead, she clarifies the concern, asks what data would help allay or confirm the concern, and then sets out to acquire the necessary facts. Consequently, in response to their requests, Bedrock parents have seen everything from scattergrams of student achievement levels in the mixed-aged classes contrasted to conventional grouping (the ranges were almost identical) to student and parent surveys on every conceivable affective and academic concern. By all appearances, the parents now support the multi-aged approach. Nevertheless, each year its

continuance will be up to the faculty.

At year-end, all available measures of student achievement were high, faculty morale was soaring, parental support was strong, and the faculty had decided to go another year with their experiment in multi-age grouping.

Could a district or principal direct a staff to successfully implement such a radically different organizational structure? Maybe. But, not with this group of teachers. These teachers assert that they have been successful because *they* are the decision makers.

Does the faculty feel Nora is essential to the process? Absolutely. In the words of one teacher, she "is receptive to teachers' attitudes and philosophies, so teachers are empowered. She communicates confidence in me. She repeatedly tells me 'I want you to be the best teacher in the school district.'"

### **A High-Energy, Charismatic Principal**

Laura Carson — vivacious, energetic 40-ish — appears most comfortable with her arm around a child. She serves as an elementary principal in a district of 29 schools that has generally hired from within. She was the exception. Laura joined the district with a well-earned reputation as a maverick from a small neighboring community.

A district administrator calls Laura a mixture of "charisma and chutzpah." Although she describes herself differently, Laura clearly understands her leadership style:

I'm high energy. I took over a leadership role where teachers were isolated. I asked them to leave their doors open. I spent a lot of time assisting in the classrooms. It was tough the first couple of weeks. Teachers wouldn't take responsibility. They hadn't ever worked together.

I started real slow and asked, "What do you want to work on?" They brought up writing. Two teachers put together the plan. It came together easily. Writing was a building need — the test scores showed that. I was having a tough time getting this group going; then I saw information on Project LEARN and thought it was a great way for administration to get people talking in the building. So I talked to two teachers who volunteered to be involved. That was the area they selected. Everything fell together easily. It was luck.

The teachers view the change in leadership similarly, yet they don't ascribe it to luck. For example, one teacher recounted that the new principal "was immediately accepted by the old staff. She is an action person. If you have an idea, she picks up the phone, and it's done. She takes care of things; she sees projects through." Another teacher talked about how the principal had completely changed the school by having high expectations for teachers and students: "People are working harder, putting in more hours in the classroom."

This push for improvement is quite public. One of the classified staff commented that the principal had had a big effect on student achievement and the atmosphere in the building: "We are busy with new projects and new ideas. The principal backs people, plus she gives follow through and support. She gives all of us responsibilities."

One thing that repeatedly came up in conversations was the way Laura involves staff in critical governance functions. She pointed out:

I try to get them to pick a focal point. At the first of the year, we establish goals and how we will reach them. We form committees, share and discuss research. I let teachers experiment with their ideas and research. They need to realize that this is a joint effort, a total school. Teachers here are responsible for all students, not just their own classes. I expect teachers to give 100 percent.

One teacher added:

Committees have a floating chairmanship. The principal asks people to work on something and get back to her. She doesn't hold it over you, saying, 'I'm the boss.' I think she just enjoys her job. She wants the school to be good and the teachers to do a good job.

A long-term member of the staff described Laura as a principal with "strong values and beliefs. She evaluates what is happening and makes suggestions, and so far she has been right!" One of the teachers noticed that she "is in the faculty room all the time. The principal proposes new ideas. Then people kick them around." Another put it this way:

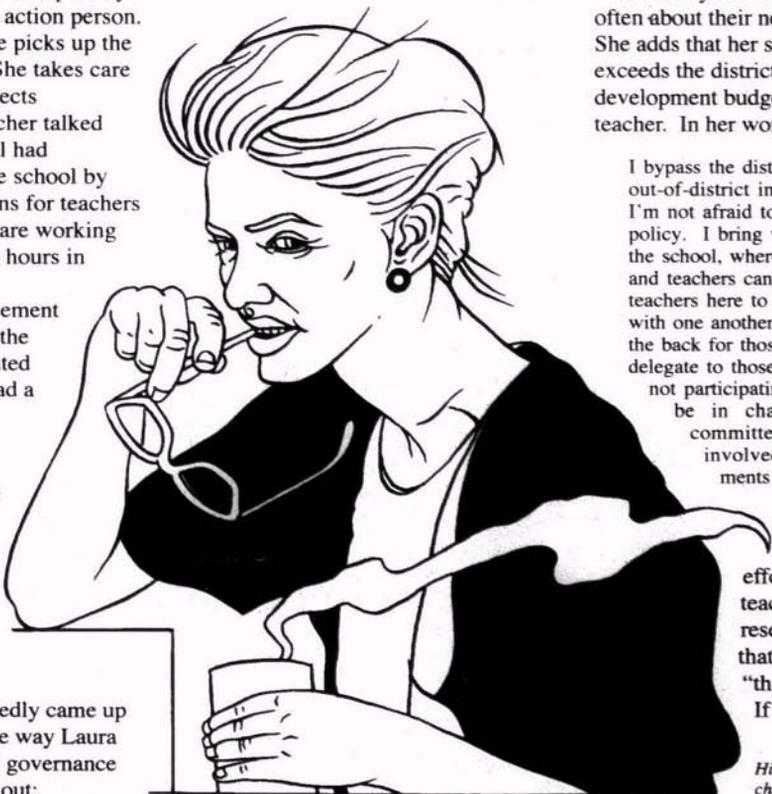
She puts things in the bulletins like, "So and so has a great idea. Go and see it." She praises teachers just like teachers praise students. She'll notice that you've spent a lot of time on something and will tell you you've done a good job. And when I'm praised, just like a child, I want to do an even better job.

Laura says that she surveys the staff often about their needs and wants. She adds that her staff continually exceeds the district's yearly staff development budget of \$500 per teacher. In her words:

I bypass the district restrictions on out-of-district inservice programs. I'm not afraid to disregard district policy. I bring workshops here to the school, where it is comfortable and teachers can participate. I get teachers here to share their talents with one another. That is a pat on the back for those teachers. And I delegate to those teachers who are not participating. I ask them to be in charge, to chair a committee. It gets people involved, and all departments are represented.

Laura's commitment inspires extra effort from the staff. A teacher on the action research team observed that she motivates "through her actions. If we are going to

High-energy, charismatic "Laura"



have a long day, we are sure *she* is going to have a long day."

The teachers at Riverview regularly work well beyond their contract time on collaborative projects. This commitment was apparently the result of participation on committee work and delegation of responsibility. It may also have to do with expressions of appreciation. As one teacher put it, "It comes from inside, from being told that you are doing a good job."

Another staff member summarized Laura's impact this way:

The principal is moving the lazy old staff out — bringing in new staff, high-energy people who are willing to spend time, even their own money, on the school. People want to do a good job for her. She is always in the classrooms. She is positive about teachers and the work they put in.

Collaboration is the key at Riverview. Although only two teachers took the action research training, the entire staff participated in their writing project, and after one year writing performance was way up. The next year, two other teachers took the lead. This time the focus was using computers for word processing. Again everyone joined, and again student scores improved.

Did the talent and drive to make these accomplishments come from Laura? No, they came from the staff. Would the staff have demonstrated those talents without her? We don't think so.

### A Common Thread

Laura Carson, Nora Burns, and Clyde Adams embody disparate leadership styles, yet all three have one thing in common: a transformational effect on the professionals who work within the

shadow of their leadership. They also share certain behaviors. Each principal endeavors to visit each classroom every day, practices active listening, and views teaching as an experimental science.

In all three schools, the faculty feel empowered. They take credit for the

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school's focus, even though they acknowledge the principal's role in giving it voice, support, and strength. Although Laura is a writing process devotee, Clyde a fan of heterogeneous grouping, and Nora a believer in multi-aged grouping, the faculties at their schools didn't feel manipulated into adopting those perspectives.

The role leadership plays in creating common understandings of the culture is similar in all three schools. While large meetings and grand symbolic actions play a part, the most significant change in work culture is accomplished in one-to-one personal interactions. The combination of focused effort and collection of data gives teachers a feeling of efficacy, moti-

vating them to voluntarily work countless hours for the intrinsic rewards of teaching.

Finally, the continuous asking of probing questions that go to the heart of the teaching/learning process enables all three principals to maintain the pressure necessary to foster school improvement. Yet, in each case these principals provide teachers with the meaningful personal support that creates a willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty.

Clyde, Nora, and Laura help us see how leadership can influence school culture so that it has a transformative impact on the professionals who work in the schools. In these three schools, that type of leadership has been shown to make schooling more effective for students and more professionally rewarding for the teachers. □

The principals and the schools described here are real. The names used are pseudonyms.

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