

Successful School Leadership in High Poverty Schools:  
An Examination of Three Urban Elementary Schools

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## **Executive Summary**

In an age of increasing performance-based accountability, increasing environmental and organizational complexity, and a growing perception that there is a shortage of high quality school leaders, it is imperative that educators and policymakers learn more about the practices employed by those school leaders who have improved the educational life chances of youngsters, especially those from high poverty urban communities, who have traditionally been at greatest risk for academic failure.

This study examined three urban elementary schools serving high poverty communities that have shown improved student achievement during the tenure of their current principals. The focus of these case studies was to identify and examine the policies and practices of these school leaders (an African American woman in each case) that contributed to improved student performance.

Case study methodology was employed in this project, first using New York State report card data to identify high needs schools with improved student achievement scores, and then a multi-perspective interview protocol to triangulate the perceptions of administrators, teachers, support staff, parent and students at each site to better understand how the principal contributed to the school's success.

The cases revealed that in addition to the core set of basic skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2003) contend are necessary, but not sufficient, for school success in almost any context (setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization), these three principals responded to the challenging circumstances of their high poverty communities by establishing safe, nurturing environments for children and adults; setting high expectations for student performance, and holding everyone - students, faculty, parents and themselves - accountable for meeting those high expectations. Although different in their individual approaches to leadership, all three women were able to set a clear direction for their school and then influenced members of the school community to begin moving in that direction, in great measure by modeling the behaviors and practices they desired.

Findings from these case studies were used to make policy recommendations related to school district succession planning and the use of monetary incentives for principal recruitment to high poverty/low performing schools; strengthening administrator preparation and practice to model the core skills for school success, especially as they pertain to high poverty urban schools; and finally, to draw implications for future research in this vital area.

## **I. Introduction and Overview**

A growing body of research indicates that school leaders, particularly principals, can exert a measurable, though indirect, positive influence on student achievement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Moreover, there is evidence that high quality leadership is especially important in schools serving low socio-economic youngsters who have often been at greatest risk for academic failure (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). In aggregate, leadership effects on student achievement appear to account for about 5% of the overall variation in pupil test scores, yet this relatively low figure represents almost 25% of all in-school variables over which educational policy-makers have some control (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), thus making leadership a variable of singular importance.

A renewed interest in the effects of leadership on pupil performance comes at a time when there is a confluence of factors potentially reshaping the role and importance of school leaders, especially those at the building level. These factors include an increasing demand to hold schools accountable for student achievement, increasing environmental and organizational school complexity and a perception that high quality leadership is in short supply.

Drawing heavily upon the research reviewed in “What do we already know about successful school leadership?” Leithwood and Riehl’s (2003) report to the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Division A Task Force on Developing Research in Educational Leadership, this paper begins with the objectives and rationale for the current project; a rationale tied explicitly to the three factors listed above. Then, based on the empirical studies reported by Leithwood and Riehl (these authors purposely eschew anecdotal reports), we present four ‘big’ ideas about how educational leadership is best conceptualized, followed by a set of three core school leadership practices Leithwood and Riehl claim are necessary, though not sufficient, to yield improved student performance in any context. These core practices are later used to organize findings from the three schools, and then redefined and expanded in light of our conclusions to place increased emphasis upon on the role of trust, support and care.

The next section of the paper provides a description of the research methodology employed in the study, including the selection of the case study sites and respondents, the interview protocols, and the limitations of the project and its transferability to other settings.

In the findings section each of the three case sites are presented. This section begins with a description of each school, including demographic characteristics of their student body and the educational and experiential background of the principal. We use New York State Education Department (SED) data to report standardized achievement scores for English-Language Arts and Math in 4<sup>th</sup> grade (for all three schools) and 8<sup>th</sup> grade (for the two schools that go up to grade 8) from 1998/99 to 2002/03, and then compare those scores with the scores of schools SED has deemed to be similar to those in our study.

Drawing quotes liberally from interviews with administrators, teachers, staff and parents from each of the three sites, the findings section also reports the perceptions of these individuals as to whether they believe

their school has been successful in meeting the needs of their students, how they define success and, if they believe the school has achieved some measure of success, why it has and what role the principal has had in making this possible.

In the final section, major themes that cut across all three sites and those that distinguish one site from another are reported and key conclusions are drawn. The paper ends with a set of policy recommendations for both the preparation and practice of school leaders who aspire to serve or currently serve in high need communities, as well as implications for further research in this critical area.

## **II. Objectives and Rationale**

Why study school leadership now?

As noted in the introduction, we believe that there are three key reasons to study school leadership at this time:

- 1) With an increased demand on the part of the public to hold schools, principals and teachers accountable for the achievement of students, measurable performance - based outcomes are critical (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003);
- 2) With environmental and organizational school contexts becoming increasingly complex, educational institutions can no longer rely on standard procedures and past practices to guide daily performance, therefore, leadership is critical;
- 3) With high quality school leadership seen as being in short supply, understanding the practices of successful leaders is critical.

All three of these factors are exacerbated in high needs schools because student achievement is typically lower and, consequently, public accountability more intense. In addition, the environmental and organizational contexts of these schools are changing rapidly due to NCLB mandates and changing community demographics. As a result, high need communities tend to include the very schools with the greatest difficulty recruiting and retaining school leaders, thus it is essential that we move quickly to develop an understanding of successful school leadership in these settings in order to better inform those who already practice in such sites and those preparing to follow them.

### **1) The impact of increased performance-based accountability.**

In addition to working on the ‘basics’ of the educational enterprise, Leithwood and Earl (2000) have identified four accountability approaches to which school leaders must now attend, either in part or in whole:

- i.) Market approaches that require leaders to create and sustain schools that can successfully compete for students;
- ii.) Decentralization approaches that require leaders to empower others through greater stakeholder “voice” in decision-making;
- iii.) Professional approaches that require instructional leadership and meaningful assessments of the work of educators; and

- iv.) Management approaches that require leaders to develop and execute strategic plans that link school means and ends.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) note that each of these approaches requires a somewhat different set of leadership skills and that the objectives of the four approaches are sometimes incompatible. Moreover, the authors contend that each, whether alone or in concert, can produce unintended and/or undesirable outcomes.

As a result of “No Child Left Behind” federal legislation, schools across the U.S., now operate in a political context of increasing public visibility and high stakes testing accountability. In New York, school report cards are published annually to track the current performance and progress of students on standardized achievement tests and to compare these results with similar schools around the state. These reports are public documents and the focus of considerable attention for a wide spectrum of constituent groups including, but not limited to: parents, teachers, school and political officials, as well as realtors and others in the business community at the local, state and national levels. Should a school in New York consistently under-perform in relation to the percentage of its students reaching mastery on these standardized tests, it is subject to public sanctions, most notably being named a School Under Registration Review (SURR). Although being a SURR school brings with it additional support and technical assistance, it can also stigmatize a school and its district and potentially cause parents to reconsider where they choose to live in order to educate their children, which in turn can have a negative effect on real property values.

If we envision a principal in a high needs elementary school on the verge of being placed under Registration review, or confronting the low levels of student achievement that typify such schools, having to address the multiple accountability masters of competition, shared decision making, sustained high student achievement and clearly articulated strategic plans, we begin to recognize the pressure filled environment that increased accountability has created. In fact, our cases reveal that all three principals have had to deal with some, if not all of these approaches to accountability, while they attempted to improve student performance in their respective schools.

## **2) The impact of increasing environmental and organizational complexity.**

Since the first waves of the educational reform movement that began two decades ago with the release of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983), important changes have occurred in how schools are configured and governed, as well as in the societal demographics within which schools operate. In terms of demographic change, Spring (2004), using U.S. Census data, reports that almost two-thirds (64)% of all foreign-born residents in the U.S. arrived on these shores since 1980, most coming from non-English speaking Asian and Central and South American nations. It is projected that between 1990-2050, the percent of the U.S. population of Hispanic origin will almost triple, growing from 9% to 25%; the percent Asian will more than double, growing from 3% to 8%; the percent Black will remain relatively stable increasing slightly from 12% to 14%; while the percent White will decline sharply from 76% to 53%. These shifting demographics are particularly evident, and even more dramatic, in America’s largest urban school systems, most of which now

serve a majority, minority population (Frankenburg, Lee & Orfield, 2003). One thing that should remain constant in the midst of this change is that the majority of parents in each of these groups will continue to send their children to public schools. Schools are currently working through the potentials and pitfalls increased diversity brings to the classroom in terms of language acquisition, cultural sensitivity and identity development. Therefore, as diversity further increases over the next few decades, so will the environmental and organizational complexity that comes with it.

In the present study, organizational complexities caused by racial and ethnic diversity is evident in only one of the three sites, with the other two schools each serving an almost exclusively African American student body. But all three schools studied must contend with students living in poverty, another factor that can effect significantly both school and student performance.

The National Center for Education Statistics study, *The Condition of Education 2002* (NCES 2002), reports that 15% of all children 5-17 years old currently live in households where the annual income is below the poverty level, with the percentage almost double (29%) for children living in central cities; a figure some would contend markedly underestimates the magnitude of the problem (Frankenburg, Lee & Orfield, 2003). One of the correlates of poverty that can impede a school's ability to successfully address student achievement is that high rates of student poverty often translate into high rates of transience, and as a result, the student composition of a classroom in June may be markedly different than what it was when the academic year began the September before. Teachers are then hard-pressed to maintain curricula coherence and continuity when students of markedly different levels of ability are frequently moving into and out of their classrooms. As we shall see, the three schools in our study are actually dealing with rates of poverty considerably higher than the national average based upon the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and rates of student transience that can be detrimental to effective instruction.

Among the factors that have increased organizational complexity over the past twenty years are reforms calling for increased teacher empowerment; a flattening of the educational governance hierarchy to permit greater site-based management and more parent and community involvement in school decision-making; and a pressing need to better utilize emergent information and communication technologies. Over the years, these organizational changes, coupled with the environmental changes noted above have tended to destabilize school cultures. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) contend that when organizational cultures are relatively stable, they can be maintained in ways other than through formal leadership. For example, local and state policies and regulations can serve as leadership substitutes (Pitner, 1986; Firestone, 1996). But when organizations such as schools start to become less stable, and take on the characteristics of a "frontier culture," strong formal leadership is typically sought by members of the school community in order to re-establish coherence and direction. In public schools, principals are assigned the roles and responsibilities of formal leadership, and it is to them that most turn when schools confront change and instability. Thus, it is essential we conduct studies, such as this one, to better understand the practices of principals who have

successfully confronted these challenges, especially principals in those schools where the challenges are greatest.

### **3) The impact of a perceived shortage in high quality school leaders.**

Conflating the impact of increased accountability with the impact of increasing complexity suggests the need for very talented individuals to step forward at this time to accept the mantle of formal school leadership. Yet teachers, who comprise the vast majority of the pool from which aspiring school leaders have traditionally emerged, no longer seem to consider educational administration as attractive a career option as in the past. Instead, they elect to remain in the classroom where they can at least retain the job security afforded by tenure, a benefit not available to most school administrators (Jacobson, forthcoming 2005).

Those who do aspire to positions of leadership now tend to make the move later in their careers. NCES data reveals that principals nowadays are older and more experienced than in the past (14 years as a teacher on average). As a consequence, the average age of principals increased from 46 to 50 years between 1987-2000, with the greatest concentration currently between ages 46-55 as opposed to 40-45 a decade earlier (Gates, Ringel, & Santibanez, 2003). Even more striking is the fact that in 1987, 38% of all principals were under age 40, but by 2000, only 12% were that young.

Exacerbating this potential supply side shortage of school leaders is the fact that it comes at a time when the administrator workforce is retiring in significant numbers. This “phenomenon” is due to principals starting their careers later and retiring younger. As evidence, given the aggregate aging of the principal workforce reported above, it is surprising that only 17% are over 55 years. What this means is that principals are now retiring after serving relatively short incumbencies (9 years on average), which in turn has increased administrator turnover. Therefore, at a time when there are fewer candidates, these compressed incumbencies are creating more job openings, thus further thinning the pool.

That said, in New York State there is evidence that sufficient numbers of individuals certified to be school administrators are available, but that their unwillingness to take on the responsibilities of leadership when confronted with the challenges of increased accountability and complexity, coupled with inadequacies in preparation may be at the root of the current shortage. Two recent studies commissioned by the State Education Department reveal that schools in New York continue to experience difficulty in attracting educational leaders in spite of a substantial oversupply of certified individuals (Papa, Lankford & Wyckoff, 2002; Lankford, O’Connell & Wyckoff 2003). Specifically, these studies found that in the State’s pool of certified individuals there are many who have never applied for an administrative position, and many others who have applied repeatedly but have not received a job offer.

The findings from New York have been replicated elsewhere and have led researchers to conclude: “Existing data reveal no evidence of a national crisis in the labor market for school administrators” (RAND, 2003 p.1). But those conclusions, developed from aggregated national data, can misrepresent what is happening in our Nation’s most high needs communities. For example, Knapp and Copland (2003) examined

83 school districts and found that while some attracted as many as 40 candidates per principal opening, other nearby districts characterized by lower salaries and higher concentrations of poor and minority students drew as few as three. The same researchers found similar, albeit less extreme, differences between schools in the Philadelphia public school system.

Principals in these high need schools must often confront the pressures of increased accountability and organizational complexity with limited human and material resources due to the tight fiscal constraints under which many systems operate. It is small wonder that the job-related stress of these leadership positions make them less desirable than similar positions in more affluent communities.

### Conceptions of leadership and essential practices of school leaders

From their review of the literature, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) drew numerous conclusions about conceptions of leadership and best leadership practice. We have taken the liberty of reducing their observations to four ‘big’ ideas, and then report a core set of three basic leadership practices the authors suggest are necessary, but insufficient, for success in almost all school contexts. We use these conceptions and skill sets to better understand the practices of the three principals in this study, then offer suggestions about how they may need to be modified and/or reconsidered in light of our findings about successful leadership in high poverty schools.

#### **1) Four ‘big’ ideas about leadership.**

- a. *Leadership has two key functions, providing purpose and direction, and exercising influence*  
In other words, leaders work through words and actions to first establish shared organizational goals and then to influence the thoughts and behaviors of others to effectively achieve them.
- b. *Leadership requires social relationships and serves social ends*  
Leadership is not an individual phenomenon that can be extracted from the social context; instead, it implies a “web of relationships” across multiple constituencies and social networks (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a; cf. Leithwood & Duke, 1999).
- c. *Leadership is contextual and contingent*  
Leadership depends on numerous factors such as the school’s social organization and social setting, the goals being pursued including resources and timeframes, the individuals involved and even the characteristics of leaders themselves (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a; Leithwood & Duke, 1999).
- d. *Leadership is a function that can be distributed*  
Given the complexity of schools as organizations, Leithwood and Riehl conclude that sources for leadership ought to shift as problems and issues shift. They cite a study by Spillane, Diamond, Walker, Halverson, & Jita (2001) on leadership for instruction in high-poverty elementary schools in which leadership was distributed across many individuals and roles depending on the curriculum area. Specifically, school principals exerted minimal leadership in areas that they had



little expertise (such as science), ceding the role to knowledgeable teachers, outside consultants or curriculum facilitators.

## **2) Core leadership practices**

### *a. Setting directions*

Leaders help to develop shared goals that encourage a sense of common purpose among followers. To successfully set a clear direction, a leader must become skillful at identifying and articulating a shared vision; creating high performance expectations for all participants; and then communicating effectively those goals and expectations.

### *b. Developing people*

As noted earlier, leadership requires social relationships, because people are influenced by direct experiences with those in leadership roles (Lord & Mayer, 1993). To influence organizational members to strive towards the achievement of shared goals, leaders must offer them intellectual stimulation and provide them individualized support. Moreover, successful leaders must provide followers an appropriate role model, using their own practices and performance to demonstrate desired behaviors, i.e., they must “walk their talk”.

### *c. Redesigning the organization*

The culture and structure of an organization should match the changing nature of a school’s improvement agenda in order to facilitate the work of organizational members (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leaders must skillfully strengthen school cultures, modify organizational structures and build collaborative processes, because without these organizational adjustments, they will be hard pressed to successfully achieve a school improvement agenda.

It is important to reiterate that Leithwood and Riehl believe that the acquisition of this basic skill set is necessary but insufficient for school success. In this study, we will show how the leaders of these three high poverty schools have demonstrated these necessary practices (to a greater or lesser extent), and then the ways in which they have exceeded them in order to be successful in their work.

## **III. Methodology**

### **Procedures and data sources**

Because a large amount of contextually sensitive data needed to be collected concerning individual perceptions, case study methodology was most appropriate for this research. Whereas quantitative approaches are more appropriate for hypothesis testing and finding patterns and associations in large data sets, case studies provide the opportunity to uncover causation through “insight, discovery and interpretation” (Merriam, 1988, p.10). In these three cases, qualitative data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included transcripts of tape-recorded interviews with the principal and 20% of

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teachers and 20% of support staff randomly selected at each school from among those who agreed in writing to be interviewed. In addition, at each site, focus group interviews were conducted with at least two groups of parents (typically 3-5 parents in each group) and two groups of students (typically 3-5 students in each group). In order to maintain the confidentiality of minors, student focus group interviews were not tape-recorded. Moreover, a two-tiered permission protocol was required for students, the first being parental permission and the second being a signed permission from the students themselves. Parent and student focus groups can more appropriately be described as opportunity, rather than random, samples.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed from a review of the literature on school leadership (see appendix). Similar, though appropriately modified, protocols were used to interview each of the five different categories of respondents: 1) principals; 2) teachers; 3) support staff; 4) parents; and 5) students. For the purpose of triangulation, secondary data were obtained from the State Education Department, from official school documents, the minutes of meetings, press reports, historical sources and ethnographic notes made during visits by the research team to the schools.

#### **Limitations of the study**

Typical of case studies involving a small number of sites, the findings from these three cases are intended to be descriptive and informative, but not necessarily transferable to other contexts. Limitations on generalizability include, but are not limited to, particular site specific conditions such as the relative autonomy and additional resources available at Fraser, the pressure of Hamilton's being a School Under Registration Review and the size and diversity of Costello's student body. Like all schools, the three in this study exist as unique social entities, nevertheless, useful insights emerge from these cases as to how effective school site leadership, patterns of relationships and behaviors, and innovative structural arrangements can help improve failing schools in high poverty, low performing and transient urban populations.

## **IV. Findings**

### **Descriptions of the case study sites**

Using SED report cards and SED reports of school improvement to document student performance, three urban elementary schools serving high poverty communities that have shown sustained, albeit occasionally erratic, improved student achievement scores during the tenure of the current principal were selected for this study. (Pseudonyms are used in place of the real names of the schools). Demographic characteristics of the three schools selected for this study are presented and compared with their respective districts. The educational and professional experiences of the principals are described, and then the standardized test scores for all three schools are reported from 1998/99 – 2002/03, and compared to similar schools in New York.

#### **Case Study 1: Costello Elementary School**

(Table 1 – about here)

Table 1 reveals that case study site #1, Costello Elementary, is a very large, racially and ethnically diverse PreK-5 elementary school with an enrollment of 800+ students ages 4-11 years; 56% African-American, 30% Caucasian, 6% Asian American, 5% Hispanic and 3% Native American. It is a high poverty school with 81% of its students eligible for free or reduced lunch. It has a fairly stable student population, with only a 4% student transient rate in 2002/03, up from 1% the year before (Table 7).

Costello is one of nine elementary schools in a small city school district with a total enrollment of over 8,000. Note that Costello's enrollment represents almost 10% of the entire district enrollment (which, in addition to the other eight elementary schools includes two middle schools and a senior high school). It also contrasts sharply with the rest of the district in that it has a majority of minority students (70%), as compared to a district average of 42%. In fact, only one other elementary school in the district has as many as 51% minority students. The school also has 70 ESL students, which is 100% of the district total. The level of need in Costello, where 81% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, far exceeds the district average of 54%.

The principal is an African-American woman who originally trained to be a Registered Nurse before becoming an educator and eventually earning a Masters degree in educational administration. She's had a lengthy career of 35 years in public education, 12 years as an administrator, 8 of which have been as a principal, and all 8 years have been as principal at Costello. She has a relatively large faculty with 56 teachers and 6 support staff. The average class size at Costello (19) is only slightly smaller than the district average (20).

(Table 2 – about here)

Table 2 reveals that over a five year period, Costello has experienced erratic improvement in ELA, for example, going from a low of 49% at mastery or above (Levels 3&4) to 70% in one year and then back down to 58% the next. Nevertheless, in every year but the most recent, Costello has exceeded the

performance of similar schools in the state, sometimes by a wide margin. The school's scores in math have been far more stable than ELA, varying only 6% over 5 years, with an average of two-thirds of 4<sup>th</sup> graders at level 3&4. Unfortunately, while Costello started out way ahead of similar schools it has lost ground since 2001/02. In aggregate, the school has scored better than similar schools on 7 out of 10 occasions.

### **Case Study 2: Hamilton Academy**

(Table 3 – about here)

Table 3 reveals that case study site #2, Hamilton Academy, is a very racially homogeneous PreK-8 school with an enrollment of 350+ students ages 4-14 years; 98% African-American, 1% Hispanic and 1% Caucasian. It is an extremely high need school with 100% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, and it has a very high student transient rate of 22% in 2002/03, down from 25% the prior year (Table 7).

Hamilton is one of 48 elementary/academy schools in one of New York's "Big 5" City School Districts (the district has 21 such 'academy' schools that go from either pre-kindergarten or kindergarten to grade 8). The district has a total enrollment of over 40000. A majority of the district's students are 'minority' (73%), while Hamilton is almost entirely African American (98%). And, in what can only be called a high needs district that provides free or reduced lunch to almost three-quarters of its students (74%), as noted above, all of Hamilton's youngsters are eligible.

The principal is an African-American woman who has a Masters degree in counseling education and a second Masters in educational administration. She's spent 14 years in education, but just 4 years as a principal, all of them at Hamilton. It is important to note that she spent several years prior to becoming a principal working at Fraser Academy, case #3 in this study. There she had the opportunity to work closely with an exemplary principal who encouraged her to enter administration.

At Hamilton, there are 36 teachers and 4 support staff. Given the school's relatively low enrollment; the average class size (17) is almost 25% smaller than the district average (21).

(Table 4 – about here)

Table 4 reveals that in 1998/99, Hamilton was doing quite well at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level in both ELA and Math when compared to similar schools, though the same cannot be said for student achievement in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. 1990/2000 was a complete meltdown for the school, with scores plummeting at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and not a single child reaching even level 3 in ELA at grade 8. Hamilton trailed similar schools in all categories that year. The new principal and a new assistant principal arrived together in 2000/01 and one can see the beginning of a turn-around in all areas except 8<sup>th</sup> grade Math. Tracking through the next two years, one can see steady improvement in all areas, especially in Math, where the school now exceeds similar schools. ELA scores are now comparable with similar schools. These changes led the State to recognize Hamilton as one of its "Most Improved." It should be clear from these scores that while we can suggest the principal has been successful in improving student achievement, it would not yet be appropriate to call Hamilton a successful school.

### **Case Study 3: Fraser Academy**

(Table 5 – about here)

Table 5 reveals that case study site #3, Fraser Academy, is a racially homogeneous K - 8 school that has an enrollment of 500+ students ages 5-14 years; 97% of whom are African-American. It is a very high need school with 83% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, yet it has a relatively stable student population, with a transient rate of 0% in 2002/03, down from 6% the year before (Table 7).

Fraser is an elementary/academy school in the same “Big 5” City School District as Hamilton. It is similar to Hamilton in that its minority population (99%) markedly exceeds the district average (73%), and its measure of need (83% free or reduced lunch) also exceeds the district average (74%).

The principal is an African-American woman who has a Masters degree in guidance and counseling and a Ph.D. in educational administration. She’s had a 38 year career in education, 23 years as an administrator including exemplary service as a principal in a major U.S. city district before become principal at Fraser a decade ago.

She has a teacher faculty of 43, with 3 support staff. The average class size at Fraser (23) is slightly higher than the district average (21).

(Table 6 – about here)

Table 6 reveals that between 1998/99-2002/03, student achievement scores at Fraser improved in every area, except 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA. The most notable improvements have been in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, where ELA scores at levels 3&4 doubled (which should bode well for future 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA scores) and Math, where 95% of students were at levels 3&4 in 2002/03. It is also important to point out that Fraser has out-performed similar schools in both ELA and math in every year reported.

In 1994, Fraser’s district entered into a partnership with a regional bank to turn around an underperforming elementary school. Fraser was selected to be that school because at the time it was one of the lowest performing schools in the district. The bank agreed to contribute \$500,000<sup>i</sup> a year in supplemental funding for the school for eight years subject to several key conditions. First and foremost was that the bank, not the district, would hire a new principal. This principal would have more autonomy than most from district governance, operating with an independent management board consisting of a representative from the bank, the district superintendent and union representatives. Resources to refurbish the building were made available at the outset of the new principal’s tenure, and the district promised to continue providing resources to Fraser in line with that spent on other schools. In other words, the bank money could be used to supplement, but not supplant district support.

### **Case Study Findings**

Having examined the student demographics of the three schools, the backgrounds of the three principals and student achievement scores for five years, we next use our interview data to get a better understanding of what each of these school leaders did that had a positive effect on student outcomes. Using

responses from our interviews with the principal, teachers, staff, parents and students from each of the three schools, we begin by asking whether they feel their schools were successfully meeting the needs of the students, and how they define success. We then try to piece together what has transpired in these schools since the arrival of the principal. Specifically, we are looking for evidence of how each of these women operationalized the three core leadership skills of setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization in the service of improving student performance in their respective schools. As we shall see, there was considerable commonality across the three sites in terms of setting the direction for a school, but far more idiosyncratic behavior when it comes to developing people and redesigning the organization. These differences appear to be related to primarily to differences in available resources and personal leadership style.

### **Case Study 1: Costello Elementary School**

At Costello, we conducted interviews with 18 educators, including the principal, her two assistant principals, 8 teachers and 7 support staff, as well as focus groups with parents and students. Overall, respondents felt the school has been successfully meeting the needs of the students, but the impoverished socio-economic conditions of many of the school's children has led faculty members to define the school's success in relative, rather than absolute, terms. That is, most of their focus is on growth and improvement in the emotional and social development of their students, and to a lesser extent, on their academic performance. Their foremost hope is to provide students with functional skills that can be built upon for future success. The following teacher response is typical:

Success for me is when a child leaves here in fifth grade they have the ability to function. What I mean by that is, if they read something and don't understand a word, they know to go to the dictionary. They know it's important to go to the dictionary so that you get the understanding. If you still don't grasp what's going on, it's important to know that you need to discuss it with somebody.

Several respondents prefaced their remarks about the school's current level of success by pointing out that Costello has had a long-standing reputation for being a 'bad' school, a school seen elsewhere in the district as characterized by student indiscipline and poor student achievement. A few teachers admitted to holding similar perceptions before coming to work at Costello but, to a person, these same individuals now challenge that perception, arguing that Costello is a safe school that has made academic progress since the arrival of the current principal eight years ago. (Their perceptions about academic progress can be supported by comparisons with similar high need schools around the state [see Table 2]).

In order to overcome the negative reputation of the school she inherited (her first posting as a principal after four years as an assistant principal in a middle school in the same district), the principal began her tenure at Costello by focusing very specifically on school safety and the physical security of students, staff and teachers. She ordered that all access to the building be shut, save one door, the main entrance to the school. There she installed a desk with a greeter and a sign-in book. When you arrive, you are asked to state your purpose and then you are given a visitor's tag with instructors to first go to the main office. The

principal's reclaiming of school security seems on the surface to be a minor, merely cosmetic restructuring of the organization, but it had tremendous symbolic import to the faculty and staff, who had long wanted the prior administration to buffer them from unwanted intrusions:

Safety and security has been a biggie with the principal. That reception area in the front hall; we never had that years ago. Teachers wanted it for years and no one seemed to be able to accomplish it. Finally she came and we got it. We keep the doors locked and people have to sign in and there's no one roaming the building; popping up in classrooms unannounced. It's been a real good thing. Staff members feel secure at work, especially in a building this size.

Embedded in this change was an implicit message about the direction she intended to take the school, i.e., teaching and student achievement would be the primary objectives at Costello and she would do what was necessary to buffer those core functions from unnecessary external interruptions, often irate and unruly parents. Greater safety for teachers and staff was, for the principal, a means to an end and not the end in itself, even though personal safety is itself an important issue. The following quote from one of the school's teacher aides makes clear her objective:

She made it a point that we don't bother teachers unless we have to, don't call rooms unless we have to, because instruction is important to her. I would say that's the major thing that I've been involved with - the whole safety issue. It was for the safety of everybody.

By implementing these initial changes to make the school safer, the principal was introducing students, teachers, support staff, parents and the broader school community to her broader vision. In so doing, she was laying the groundwork for Costello to become a nurturing learning environment for children and adults alike. She recognized that many of the children in her charge confront challenging out-of-school circumstances daily, such as violence, drugs and various forms of physical and social deprivation in the neighborhoods surrounding the school. She wanted to create a space that was free of those dangers for her students for at least 6-8 hours a day. She emphasized the need for teachers and support staff to go beyond the 'basics,' and to help students develop strategies and skills needed for functional literacy and life after school. This required teachers and staff to start treating youngsters more respectfully, especially when dealing with indiscipline. Her sense was that by treating students respectfully, teachers would in turn be the recipients of respect and that these behaviors were prerequisites for social growth. Social growth (also referred to by some respondents as character growth) emerged in numerous interviews, with faculty linking future success in life to socially appropriate behaviors, such as proper manners, being held accountable and being able to get along with others both in school and out. As one teacher told us:

She instilled discipline with respect and brought structure and order to the school. We discipline with respect and dignity. That is something that the principal really stressed and she worked very hard to change when she came and she made changes. She slowly changed our way of disciplining students. We discipline with respect and dignity and we make that student feel as though he is special and he is important and each student knows that. That idea of respect and recognition is something that's crafted. That's a concept, prior to her coming, that many of us didn't do.

Instilling order, safety, respect and discipline were, in and of themselves, not enough to help students

succeed academically. After the legacy of a weak and professionally inattentive prior school administration, teachers needed to be convinced that all children could and would learn. What was also needed was a cohesive instructional program around which teachers could align their instruction so that students could move successfully from one grade to the next. This proved to be a somewhat difficult undertaking in a highly unionized and toxic culture, and several veteran teachers objected to what they perceived as her interference in their professional practice. Not until three years ago, when the principal invited a number of veteran teachers to explore the America's Choice literacy program and then present their view that the whole faculty should adopt the program, was significant progress made. We encountered a few veteran teachers who still felt that they were given too little say in the decision to adopt the program given their expertise. They felt she should have been more attentive to their concerns before foisting the program on them. Nevertheless, she persisted in her efforts and, in conjunction with an assistant principal knowledgeable in curriculum and a group of respected curriculum coordinators integral to the structure of America's Choice, she introduced the program to the school, even over the objections of those veteran teachers. As it turned out, the America's Choice literacy program has proven to be, by all accounts, remarkably successful for the school; so much so that it has been adopted by the entire district. Even her detractors (veteran teachers who originally objected to the implementation of the program) voice grudging admiration for her tenaciousness in what proved to be a critical battle. The following response tells the story succinctly:

She brought order to the school, discipline to the school, and high expectations for behavior. But academically, it was still just teachers doing what they wanted to do, not very high expectations for these kids as far as learning. When she brought that program in here (America's Choice), even though there was a high resistance and pushed it, was able to push it through, ...and got the stakeholders to come on board. A lot of principals would have just said, "That's too much work", and she didn't. She didn't care, she knew it would be what's best for kids, and it has because it's brought consistency to the building. There are standards in place; there are expectations in place. And kids and teachers are doing it. And it's fantastic.

The principal was the individual most often cited by respondents as being the driving force behind the school now successfully meeting the needs of students. When people talked about her, several key themes emerged that speak directly to the direction she set for the school and how she influenced the behavior of children and adults alike. Specifically, she set and modeled high expectations for student performance and insisted that students and adults, parents included, be held accountable for making sure that those expectations were met. She expressed in both word and deed her deep concern and care for her students' welfare and her deeply held belief that these children can and will learn, notwithstanding the challenges they confront daily outside of school. The following teachers' responses make clear the pervasive impact she has had on the school's culture:

High expectations; that's the key factor, I think. The expectation that every student here can learn and every student will learn no matter what, that is what's made a tremendous difference. Before it wasn't like that, it wasn't always like that here. It changed because the people in leadership changed. It is just a fact that those expectations were not there and they are there now. When you come into this school, every child will be respected. Every child will be expected to learn and every person who is



in the building will be expected to teach that child; not just the classroom teacher, but the custodian staff, the cafeteria, everybody has a part in that child's education.

She is the pulse beat of the school. She's here every day, she knows who's here, she knows who's not here; she sees you when you walk in that door in the morning. She makes sure the school is secure. You just know that everything is operating smoothly. She's an excellent leader. I believe she treats the school like it's her home. It's a beautiful school; it's well kept. Everything is furnished nicely and the hallways are always clean.

The principal also recognized that if your staff is going to have the capacity to meet the high expectations hold for them, you need to provide them with the material and emotional resources to meet those goals. In that regard, most of the teachers, staff and parents we spoke to view the principal is as being supportive of their needs, noting that she works hard to address and resolve their problems, often with a personal touch that makes them feel as if their concerns have been heard:

She's got a very hands-on technique. She's constantly in touch with everyone; she keeps in touch with her entire staff. She's always asking them questions and seeing how they're doing and asking them if they need any support or anything like that, which our previous administrators never did.

You know that she is very supportive and that it's about getting our job done. You'd have to meet her to really understand. Always asking me "How can I help you?"

She remembers that she was a parent once, and she's a grandmother now. When parents come in, even with children with problems, I have yet to see a parent leave not feeling something has been resolved.

But with her support comes the expectation that you will make a genuine contribution to the success of the students, parents included. In other words, she holds everyone accountable, especially teachers, in an effort to rehabilitate the school's reputation. For some, this has been a very positive change. They are pleased to finally have a leader who holds people accountable for doing what they get paid to do. The following two responses express that perspective:

I think that she has tried very hard to undo the bad publicity that the school has had. I think that she's also made teachers realize that they are accountable for what they produce at the end of the year or at the end of the day. I think that that's a positive change.

Holding people accountable for their jobs. It's their jobs to teach and she expects them to teach. She expects the job to be done and it should be. It goes without saying; it should be done. You're being paid to do a job: you should do it. I think it encourages people to work harder.

When it comes to parents, the principal believes that success can be assured only if they are also involved in their children's education, therefore, she expects them to support the school's efforts. The principal explained how she has tried to convey this idea:

Parents now understand — regardless of what is assumed on the outside — when you come into this building, whether they come from the White House or the poor house, parents are respected. Our expectation of you is that you will support us with your gift in nurturing your child.

By all accounts, the principal has a very strong presence and her leadership style is very direct and

assertive. We were told, off the record, that because of these characteristics she can also be intimidating and that there are some teachers and parents who are afraid of her. We received more than one request from individuals wishing to participate in the study, but only if they didn't have to sign a consent form and if we would conduct the interview over the phone and not record anything. When we explained that our study had a stringent, pre-approved protocol that we would not deviate from, they declined to formally participate, but made it clear that while they felt the school had made significant improvements, they felt it was at times coerced and that if they went on record there might be retribution, notwithstanding our assurances of anonymity. We have no other evidence to confirm how wide spread this perception is, but we feel obligated to provide the reader with at least this limited amount of information. In fairness, the overwhelming response we received from individuals we met in the school, both on and off the record, were very strong endorsements in support of her leadership and respect for her commitment and love of her students.

### **Summary Case Study 1: Costello Elementary**

In her first posting as a principal, the principal at Costello was given a school that had a bad reputation within the district. Far and away the largest elementary school in the district (and the largest of the three schools in this study), it is characterized by considerable racial and ethnic diversity and high levels of poverty, factors that can increase environmental and organizational complexity and negatively affect student achievement. Over the course of the principal's 8-year tenure, Costello, like other schools in NY, faced increasing pressures of professional and management accountability brought about by the Learning Standards and NCLB. She was also pressured by the legacy of a weak predecessor, a negative school reputation and union/management relations that are sometimes adversarial at both the building and district levels.

With her arrival, she set a very clear tone for the school, and safety and control were her first orders of business. She immediately set about reorganizing structural and cultural aspects of the school that interfered with student learning. There was a new 'sheriff' in town, and if that ruffled some people's feathers, so be it. She made it clear that she was going to create an environment that was safe and nurturing because that is what is best for children. She was visible and vigilant in making sure that this occurred, and perhaps even polarizing in so doing. Our data indicate that the non-positive responses about her leadership came from a few, very senior teachers with almost 20 or more years of experience, some of whom still chafed at her forcefulness and pushed back when she implemented the new literacy program several years into her incumbency. But as noted earlier, she was tenacious when it came to getting the program adopted and her persistence in the face of some strong opposition is a trait that even those who originally objected now find honorable, especially in light of the program's success.

In absolute terms, it would be hard to describe Costello as an academically successful school. But in relative terms, it consistently out-performs similar schools in the state on the annual ELA and math tests. More importantly, in the eyes of most of the school's teachers, support staff and parents, Costello has become

increasingly successful at meeting the emotional and social needs of its students. It is now doing a better job of providing these children with the functional survival skills needed to succeed both in and outside of school.

### **Case Study 2: Hamilton Academy**

At Hamilton, we conducted interviews with 17 educators, including the principal, her assistant principal, 11 teachers and 4 support staff, as well as focus groups with parents and students. In general, respondents paint a picture of Hamilton being a school recovering from recent past failures; failures in performance that were so bad that it was placed on under registration review by the state. But after four years of hard work, Hamilton is now perceived as a school on its way back to meeting the needs of its students successfully, yet a school still not far enough along in the improvement process to be called successful. As the Assistant Principal told us. “We were at zero. That was the good thing. We only had one way to go, nowhere to go but up.”

When the principal arrived at Hamilton in 2000/01 to assume her first posting as a principal, she was greeted with the news that the school had been named a SURR school. Table 4 reveals how bad student performance was the prior year, 1999/2000, when only 12% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and none of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders achieved mastery on the ELA test and only 24% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and 6% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders achieved mastery on the state Math exam. Fortunately for the principal, the assistant principal, who arrived at the school the same year, had an educational philosophy that was very compatible with her own, and though their simultaneous arrival at Hamilton was more a matter of good luck on the part of the district than careful planning, it proved to be the beginning of significant change in the school.

By most accounts, the key school change was in the attitude and values the principal and assistant principal brought with them. Almost to a person, those interviewed identified the principal as being the most significant individual in changing the expectations of students, faculty and parents regarding acceptable student behavior in and around the school and what should be expected of student performance. We heard repeatedly that she would not allow either the teachers or the students to use a deficit model of social capital, such as the difficult socio-economic circumstances that exist within the surrounding community, to explain away or rationalize poor academic achievement or antisocial behavior. Her constant mantra was, “You will not fail in this school. You will learn.”

Using her positional authority, she established clear rules and procedures for everyone and made it clear that there would be consequences for non-compliance. As the principal told us:

I think with any kind of setting there has to be clearly defined leadership. There have to be clearly defined rules and procedures for all of us to follow and there have to be clearly defined and understood consequences. We started to just redefine the way we viewed this school—that it was a place for teaching and learning. That was the whole purpose. . . . And once teachers knew that there was someone who was not afraid of the kids, who could control the types of behavior through dialogue and consequence, they became empowered, at least in the classroom, to feel that they had more control.

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Being under registration review focused the school's energy and attention on improving student performance, especially on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and Math tests. The principal committed the school to the idea that measurable learning would be the central mission of school because, as she tells everyone, "Everything leads back to student achievement." Her beliefs are clearly articulated in the following quote:

If the purpose of the school is to learn, then that's what has to happen. You have to facilitate that for children. It's all about success...we told them every single day that this is a school for success; it is not a school for failure. If you do not want to work, this is not where you need to be.

Students and faculty would now be held more accountable for their performance given the very clear mandate imposed by the State when the school was placed under registration review. Her vision and expectations were made explicit to the staff and her assumption of her leadership responsibilities resonated with many faculty members, in part because the values and practices she was espousing were seen as being genuinely supportive of children and not just the rhetorical pronouncements of an ambitious administrator. She had a 'can do' attitude and backed her words with action, as the following three responses from faculty members attest:

Our principal is very clear in what she expects and that makes her a good leader. Right down from our lesson plans to what she expects of you in our classroom, we know our expectations. There's no second-guessing what you're supposed to be doing or what you should do. And if you're not meeting expectations, then help is there.

She came in and she had a program. She knows what she wants. She has a very good vision for this school. It's a happy, healthy vision for the school and for the kids—it's not a self-serving vision. You won't ever see her on the news. She is selfless.

When she came here, she had a plan. She had ideas, or at least it sure looked that way. And she let us know that this is the way it's going to be done and it'll work. And it worked. It did work. And we backed her up and she backed us up. She stands there for us. And I think that that was it. It was a firm "we're going to make this work and it will."

She realized that reculturing the school so that everyone viewed student achievement as its core mission was a change necessary to promote improvements in learning. But she also knew that if she didn't provide other supports and resources for the faculty it would be insufficient to produce the desired results. In order to better enable teachers and staff to reach their students, they needed more training to develop a greater repertoire of skills, more professional development opportunities and more time to plan. The principal told us about some of the changes in classroom practice she's observed since making these professional development opportunities available:

I started to look for professional development for teachers because the reality was; they were doing the best they could do. But it wasn't really bringing about the results that we needed. I believed these children could do more...When I started it was all teacher-directed; it was all pen and pencil. You would hear little conversation. Today, if you went into a classroom, you'd see some really cool stuff in most of them. You'd see kids working in cooperative groups. You'd see the teacher moving around the room, working with a small group, while the other kids may be working independently. You would see word walls, pre-K eight, including foreign language.

Teacher and staff responses confirm that the principal's efforts at enabling improved instruction, especially with regards to preparing students for standardized tests, have yielded positive results both in terms of the test scores themselves and, consequently, in terms of teacher and student confidence and motivation. Teachers feel empowered to try new approaches because the principal "loves to see new things in classrooms." She doesn't punish or threaten them if their plans don't turn out as productively as first hoped. She tries new initiatives herself, especially when it comes to reading. She has placed a lot of emphasis on finding ways to encourage students to read more, both in and out of school with the development of a lending library, and people note that she will carefully research new practices to see if they are best suited for the school and its students. She has also provided teachers with training for identifying the needs of students and to use test statistics to better understand how to improve student performance. Faculty members told us that they now feel better equipped to identify students who are having difficulty with reading and math and, therefore, better prepared to implement different teaching and learning strategies to help them improve their test scores:

We're becoming successful at teaching to the tests and getting the test grades up. Eighth grade math alone, I think we had three points the year before last, and last year we went up to forty-some. So we increased quite a bit. Still below average, but we jumped more than others jumped, so I think we're getting successful in learning how to teach for the test.

We're getting kids more motivated each year to learn, so there's more kids who want to learn, which is nice to see. I guess with the test scores improving, the kids feel better. Even if I still feel like I don't do enough teaching the way I want to, they feel more confident, they see the increase and they want to learn harder, which is nice.

Though most faculty members seem to appreciate her direction and approach to school improvement, not all teachers responded well to these changes and if they didn't, the principal did what she could to encourage them to leave. When she had the chance to exert some influence on new hires, she tried to select teachers whose values and beliefs were more compatible with those of the school culture she was trying to create. As noted earlier, she did not want teachers in her school who are prone to blaming the social and economic conditions in a child's life for poor performance. She is not so naïve as to believe that poverty doesn't affect student performance, but she did not want her teachers to allow poor academic performance to become acceptable because the "kids are poor". Therefore, much like the principal at Costello, the principal at Hamilton recognized that in order for the school to succeed, she had to address the social and emotional needs of the children, as well as the pedagogic needs of her faculty. In this regard, her prior training and experience as a school counselor served her well. She and her assistant principal quickly moved to create a safe and supportive environment by being visible in hallways and classrooms around the school and taking direct control of student indiscipline. They set standards for student performance and behavior and expected adults in the school to be consistent in enforcing those standards. If a student did something inappropriate in language or deed, they needed to be corrected, in a firm but respectful manner. These infractions didn't need to be just for major incidents that would demand stern consequences, such as fighting. It could also include

things seemingly as minor as the incorrect use of language, i.e., improper grammar and syntax, which only required a simple explanation of correct usage. Her point was that all of these things matter, and that the adults in the building need to demonstrate that they care enough about the children to help in every way possible – that there are numerous ‘teachable moments’ besides regular classroom instruction or crises. As the following teacher responses make clear, the administration’s efforts have set the tone for the school and this has had a positive effect on the morale of students and adults alike:

Her first step here was creating a safe environment for the children; a place they could go to where there was no chaos, in the halls, in the auditorium, in the lunchroom, in the library. I think that’s why she has her walks through the building with the Assistant Principal and the coordinator; to keep things under control—to make sure the children know she’s around keeping an eye on them. Once she established control of the building, she started working on the academics and it just fell into place. I am very happy being here.

Her basic philosophy—that if you are here, you will achieve—has come through to the kids. They have been able to understand that she is serious about that. She has been able to communicate that to them very successfully.

It’s from the top down. They’re told they’re going to learn. The kids are surprised when the principal or the assistant principal asks, “Why are you missing three math homework assignments?” They’re surprised, but at the same time they know someone’s going to be coming after them because they owe work.

They (the principal and assistant principal) came in and if the kids didn’t know their math facts, they brought them into the office and did math facts with them during lunch or after school.

I think the biggest thing is that we have student expectations. We had very poor language skills and we were told never to correct the children before and she expects you to. That has come from her. She expects us to do it.

The administration here is wonderful. They are constantly being seen, they walk the halls, they take an interest in the children that you don’t see in too many schools. They’re not just outsiders looking in; they take a very active role.

The students are in an environment where they’re cared about and it makes a difference whether they learn or not.

The principal’s style and steadfastness has earned her the respect of those around her because she always attempts to turn bad situations into positive learning experiences – which, of course, is an approach she is modeling for all school interactions. She is known for treating people fairly and rolling up her sleeves even teaching children herself, and getting herself and others actively involved when the situation calls for it. Her willingness to make herself available, to listen to people’s concerns and to lead by example are particularly important when it comes to developing and influencing people. In a school as small as Hamilton, it would be hard not to have people acutely aware of your demeanor and work ethic. Because it was a school that had just been placed under registration review, the bright light of professional accountability and public scrutiny was turned on Hamilton from the very first day of the principal’s incumbency. This would have been

a daunting task for any principal, but imagine walking into to such a situation in you first posting. Fortunately, as noted earlier, the principal had spent several seminal years working closely with the principal at Fraser Academy, a very accomplished veteran administrator who had already successfully turned around a failing elementary school in a major urban district and was well on the way to doing it again at Fraser (as detailed in case study #3). Using the same game plan she saw introduced so successfully at Fraser Academy, i.e., first create a safe environment and make improving student performance the core mission of the school, then build the capacity of all involved to support the enterprise, including the involvement of parents and community members as significant partners to meet that object (through such after-school events as a family math program); the Hamilton principal rolled up her sleeves and threw herself into the task, albeit without the material resources and autonomy made available to the principal at Fraser. As the principal herself told us,

I learned from [the Fraser Academy principal] and my training in the LIFTS program at the University at Buffalo that you have to work alongside teachers and parents and develop a vision for improvement that everyone will get behind. That means sometimes you distribute leadership to others and sometimes you just get in there and do the hard work yourself. I don't know what I would have done without the LIFTS training and good mentoring. It has been a real challenge, but I was well prepared in my training. I was extremely well prepared.

The following testimonials from teachers, staff and parents paint a clear picture of what she has done to engender their respect. Implicit in these responses is that she has established a clear and desirable direction for the school, she has taken the lead in moving the school down that path and, as they watch how she conducts herself on a daily basis, they are committed to following:

She has a way about her that even if you're in there to get your hand slapped, it ends on a positive note. We talk about the problems, whatever the problem may be and always praise and try to build collegiality throughout. People respect her. They know she's demanding, but in a fair way. She knows how to get what she wants without intimidating anyone.

I've been through a lot of administrators in thirty years and she is the best administrator I have had. She is concerned, she is open to people talking, she is open to ideas and she never raises her voice, which is highly unusual.

I think she's responsible, she's our leader here; she's our principal. Because she's trying everything that she can do and is open to new ideas, it makes us push harder too. We want this school and our kids to be successful. We want them to learn; we want them to be able to compete out there in this world. We want all of that, don't we? I know I do. I know other teachers that do. And I think the principal is the catalyst here.

Her statement is, this is not a school where you may fail and she reiterates that; she will take kids who are not performing—their assignments are not in—and she will sit with them after school. This is called putting your money where your mouth is. And that has a good effect.

You can't ask people to do things that you're not willing to do yourself. If you're not willing to stay after and come in on Saturday, and if you're not willing to sit in the office and help a kid who's after school, then don't ask anyone else to do it. Those things have happened. Leading by example is the biggest thing that's made a difference. She's going to stand out on the street corner with everybody else in the rain to make sure the kids all get outside. I think if you honestly look at it, it's made all the difference in the world.

The fact that she makes herself available to talk to parents—it could be early in the morning or very late in the day when you can tell she’s tired and had a long day, she still will take that time to come on in. And the fact that you take time with me, then whatever it is that I have that’s going on is important to you, even at the end of your long day, makes a big difference for a parent and they’re more willing when that child has a problem or they’re not doing what they’re supposed to do, that parent is going to go the extra mile because the principal went the extra mile.

It is important to note that another somewhat serendipitous factor may have contributed to the school’s improved test scores. Over the past few years, there has been a decline in enrollment, in part the result of parents pulling their children from the school because of low performance. This drop in enrollment has produced smaller class sizes, especially in the upper grades. Consequently, students in the eighth grade have been working with the same teachers for at least the past two years and these teachers have gotten to know them well. As one upper grade teacher told us, “Nobody can slide by as easily as they could last year.” Now, there’s extra help for any child who wants it, and the school is working hard trying to educate parents, especially those with children in the early grades, about how to take advantage of this opportunity so that their youngsters don’t fall behind.

### **Summary Case Study 2: Hamilton Academy**

There seems to be consensus that Hamilton’s turn around began when the administrative team arrived four years ago and were confronted with the fact that the school had just been placed under registration review, which immediately raised the pressure of professional accountability to a whole new level. The principal, in her very first posting as a principal, arrived with a clearly articulated philosophy about what a school should be, what was acceptable behavior from children and adults, and what was not. We know that much of this philosophy was honed during her years at Fraser Academy, a school much like Hamilton in that it is characterized by high poverty and racial homogeneity (although Hamilton is currently troubled by considerably more student transience than Fraser). To this setting, she brought with her a belief that in this school, children WOULD learn, and that children and adults would be held accountable for making this happen in measurable terms. She didn’t ask people to do things she wouldn’t do herself, and she handled even negative situations as potential learning opportunities. She provided whatever limited resources were at her disposal for professional development and in-service training; encouraged experimentation in the classroom; and persisted in creating a nurturing, safe environment for children. There were several respondents who called this approach a ‘top-down’ change in school culture, but not in a disparaging way. Rather, it is a respectful acknowledgment that it was this new principal and her assistant who introduced and fostered this more positive attitude about children being able to learn and be successful academically, despite living and working in challenging conditions.

After four years under her leadership, Hamilton is still a school in the process of turning around. Still too early to be called a successful school, but far enough along for people to recognize that significant



headway has been made in attending to the needs of the “whole” child, most notably in improving the academic performance of students on the State’s standardized ELA and math tests.

### **Case Study 3: Fraser Academy<sup>1</sup>**

At Fraser, we conducted interviews with 20 educators, including the principal, her program coordinator (which is analogous to a teacher serving as an assistant principal), 12 teachers and 6 support staff, as well as focus groups with parents and students. Respondents were unequivocal in their belief that Fraser Academy is successfully meeting the needs of students, and to a person they attribute the school’s success to the principal and the high expectations she sets for the children. Over the course of her tenure, the school has risen from being one of the lowest performing schools in its district to one of the highest, and in 2001, the school was recognized as one of the most improved schools in New York State for student performance in eighth grade math, as well as being the most improved school in math that year in its county.

It is the principal’s single-minded attention to the needs of the children that most see as having been the linchpin for the school’s turn-around. Among parents, there is no debate whether the school is now successful, and the aura of success, both in terms of their children’s academic performance and their own civic pride, are now regular expectations of the community and not just hoped-for goals. There is a sense that this success is an on-going activity, and that everyone must remain vigilant through continuing professional development and assessment.

Only a decade earlier, the climate at Fraser was not as positive and upbeat. When the current principal accepted her position at Fraser in 1994, the building was dirty, covered with graffiti and in need of repairs. Inside the school, discipline problems were rife and students were constantly fighting. Outside the school, run-down rental property, derelict buildings and “crack” houses were commonplace in the surrounding neighborhood. Academic achievement was low and the principal recalled that the prevailing attitude among faculty members, who were predominantly white, was that students, who were predominantly African American, didn’t care about education and therefore, didn’t want to learn.

In 1992/93, the school’s suspension and transient rates of 6% and 48% respectively were nearly double the district average. At 275 students, enrollment was at an all time low for a school building that had first opened in 1923.<sup>2</sup> Neighborhood parents were frustrated and feared for the future of their children. As the principal noted:

They did everything they possibly could to not enroll their children in the school because the school really had a reputation of not being a place where you want your children to be...and those who were here were children of the families who just didn’t have the political wherewithal to have their children go somewhere else.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed report about Fraser Academy see Giles et al. (2004)

<sup>2</sup> Enrollment is currently more than double that figure and there is a waiting list because the bank partnership has capped enrollment at 600 to prevent overcrowding.

To make matters worse, parents did not feel welcome in the building, so they shied away from school functions, rarely attending parent/teacher conferences or collecting report cards. One veteran teacher recalled that when parents did come to school, “they used to chase the teachers behind the counter [in the office] to try to beat them up”. The same teacher went on to note that, “Teachers didn’t collaborate with each other, parents didn’t respect teachers, teachers didn’t respect the parents and students had no respect for either of them.” Another teacher who worked in the school before the current principal arrived added, “The expectations weren’t there. The parent support wasn’t there. The building was in a shambles.”

In 1993, the district entered into a partnership with a regional bank interested in sponsoring an under-performing elementary school in hopes of improving student performance, which in turn might help to revitalize the local community. The bank agreed to contribute \$500,000 a year to the school for at least eight years, subject to several key provisos: 1) the bank would recruit a new principal; 2) this new principal would have more autonomy than other principals in the school district and would answer to an independent management board consisting of a representative from the bank, the district superintendent and union representatives; 3) the bank also obtained assurances that the resources necessary to refurbish the building would be made available at the outset of the principal’s tenure; and, 4) that the district would continue to fund Fraser Academy commensurate with other schools in the district. In other words, the bank’s money could be used only to supplement, not supplant district support.

Unlike the principals at Costello and Hamilton, the principal hired for Fraser came to the position in 1994 with considerable experience as a principal, having worked successfully to turn around a high poverty elementary school in a major urban school district in the Midwest. Although she had experience working in a decentralized system, she was particularly attracted to Fraser by the considerable autonomy from district regulations that the bank had negotiated for her. She was also attracted extrinsically to the position by the attractive salary it offered. The agreement negotiated between the district and the bank placed the new principal on an early step in the district’s administrator schedule, with that amount generously supplemented by the bank. The total compensation package for the position made her one of the highest paid administrators in the district. Finally, she was attracted intrinsically to the position by the challenge of replicating her prior success in turning around an under performing, high poverty school, a task that for her is more of a mission than a job.

As in the first two cases, when the principal came to Fraser, she began her tenure by creating the conditions for the school to become a physically safe environment in order to secure for her students a space free from the dangers of the surrounding neighborhood. Although difficult to quantify, the conditions she confronted at Fraser and the environs immediately surrounding the building were probably even more daunting than those at either Costello or Hamilton. Like her colleagues at Costello and Hamilton, she closed all doors to the school, save one, to protect students and faculty from unwanted intruders and disruptions. But, at the same time, she also introduced a new ‘open door’ policy that has come to symbolize for teachers

and parents the seminal step in revitalizing the school. Prior experience had taught her that parents and other community members are vital allies in the work necessary to improve student achievement - allies that need to be invited into the school and not discouraged from entering. Having a principal who seems never to be too busy to listen to their individual or collective concerns helped to build trust and made parents and teachers alike feel that they were valued, had someone to champion their needs and gave them a voice in school decision making. In fact, both parties feel that she is especially skillful in negotiating sensitive issues between teachers and parents, maintaining a very professional posture of impartiality and transparency in her dealings with them. Teachers feel supported when she runs interference for them with angry parents, and parents know she will deal effectively with teachers who they think are not acting on behalf of the best interests of their children.

It is in building and sustaining these critical relationships with parents that teachers feel the principal has particularly excelled. She makes an extraordinary effort to communicate with parents and to get them involved in school events. She tries to greet parents at the beginning and end of the day, and whenever possible, she engages them in conversation and makes a point of knowing students, parents and family members by name. Teachers are expected to write a monthly class newsletter, which she reviews and then sends to parents, along with information about school events they should support and attend. She also encourages teachers to write and call parents directly and invite them personally to school events. She recognizes that a productive teacher/parent partnership is the best academic support team a child can have. Contrast this approach to developing social relationships with the previously described antipathy that characterized the school she inherited, and one begins to understand the profound culture change she was undertaking. She made her school community aware that their active participation was an absolute requisite if the school was to turn around. Her mission was to get people to realize that real school improvement happens both inside and outside the school walls, and that attempts towards school improvement succeed only when the whole community begins to support its children. In fact, the comment we heard most often about the principal was that she always advocates for children, always placing their needs first. Quite often the word 'family' was used to describe the prevailing ethos of the faculty and the school, with the principal described as a 'mother hen' whom students, faculty and parents don't want to disappoint.

She has fostered this warm, nurturing environment through her open door policy and approachability. She is described as a visible and positive presence throughout the school, regularly visiting classrooms and ensuring, "that we teach the kids, ... and if we don't, she'll let you know". She is also a very visible and positive presence in the surrounding community. In fact, one of her first occasions to make her presence felt 'out of school' has become something of a legend. It seems that early in her tenure a local storeowner called the school's main office about students from Fraser fighting outside his store. As one teacher recounted the story:

She kicked off her shoes, I mean seriously kicked off her little heels, put her little flats on and said, "Let's go," jumped in her Mercedes Benz and rolled down the street the wrong way because it was

closer. ... She took care of business, came on back, and continued on.

We heard about the ‘running shoes’ she keeps under her desk (which she showed us is true) from numerous respondents. We heard about how she’d closed neighborhood ‘crack’ houses (which is partially true in that she got parents and other members of the community involved in pressuring the media and police to get more aggressive in cleaning up that destructive element). And, we even heard that she’d run some major street gangs out of the city she’s worked in before (which is not true, but is a myth she feels no need to dispel). In other words, she has become an almost larger-than-life figure in the community, someone who can be counted on to do what it takes to help children succeed. Her strength gives strength and hope to others; a perception enhanced by the fact that she is also seen as someone who treats people fairly, even when she needs to reprimand them. What happens in the principal’s office if she “has to let you know”, has also become something of a school legend. As one teacher related with evident relief, “I haven’t had that talk...Thank goodness. ... If you sit in the office long enough, you see people come out and they’re not always the happiest”. In the most problematic circumstances, i.e., with individuals who continue not to buy into the school’s central mission that all students CAN and WILL learn, they are tactfully, but firmly “encouraged” to move on. As noted earlier, the principal inherited a faculty in 1994 that was 95% white; a faculty whose pervasive instructional ethos was that the school’s predominantly black students couldn’t or didn’t want to learn and therefore expectations for student performance were very low. Today, the faculty is 40% minority, and whether you’re black or white, if you don’t believe these youngsters can learn at a high level of proficiency, this is not the school for you.

The faculty members interviewed now set high expectations for student academic performance. Most noted that they see these same expectations modeled by the principal, who holds high performance expectations for herself and for her faculty. Moreover, they commend her because she recognizes that in order for them to achieve her expectations, teachers and support staff require on-going professional capacity building. She has therefore leveraged a considerable amount of the fiscal support provided by their bank partner to make professional development the cornerstone of the school’s instructional culture. Teachers and support staff noted that the wealth of in-service opportunities made available is a main contributor to their feeling equipped to work with the school’s population.

They also value the material support she has provided in helping them translate student achievement expectations on standardized tests into effective classroom practice. For example, “[The principal] purchased these books for us, for our entire fifth grade level, and we had a consultant come in and talk about the test and how the test should be taken, what’s expected”. Teachers also pointed to the fact that the principal willingly modified the school’s master schedule to enable them to work with small groups of children who need additional remediation twice a week. Being given the time to concentrate on the specific needs of these children has paid dividends in terms of their academic performance.

Compared to most other schools in the district, Fraser has a relatively ‘flat’ administrative structure

because the principal has distributed key responsibilities through the use of five site-based management committees: curriculum; discipline; parent involvement; morale, and beautification, all of which have parent representation. Each of these committees sends a representative to the school's site-based decision-making team. In order to accommodate this level of distributed decision making and to provide time for shared instructional planning, a great deal of work has gone into reconfiguring the school schedule, which is slightly longer both on a daily and annual basis than other schools in the district, due in part to: 1) contractual obligations resulting from their partnership with the bank; 2) their commitment to the distributed leadership model they employ; and, 3) the professional expectations and workplace norms that have now become part of the school culture. In exchange for these additional time commitments, teachers receive additional compensation through participation in an after school program supported by the bank and/or summer school teaching.

Modifying teacher schedules to accommodate common planning times, committee meetings and small group instruction is not a simple undertaking, and it took a considerable amount of the principal's time and energy to work out all the bugs. Our respondents recognize and are grateful that so much time and money has been invested in the students. In a district under severe fiscal constraints, they appreciate that the investments she has made have been made wisely. The bank's money has not simply been thrown at problems, but instead used to purchase services and materials that have contributed significantly to the school's improved academic performance, and, subsequently, to increases in their students' self-esteem and motivation, and to their own sense of self-efficacy. One gets the sense that people are genuinely happy to be working in this school. We were told repeatedly that faculty and administration work well together, about the wonderful communication that exists, and about the support, collegiality and cooperation they experience with each other, the principal, parents and the community. In essence, all stakeholders feel that through their collective efforts, they are making a difference in the lives of the children who attend Fraser, and that is very gratifying both professionally and personally.

The school has also been successful in making important changes in how parents are looking at the neighborhood as a place to live and raise families. As noted at the beginning of this case, before the principal arrived, parents who could afford it moved out of the area rather than send their children to Fraser. But during the course of our interviews, we heard repeatedly about people moving into the neighborhood explicitly for the purpose of having their children attend Fraser, or opting not to move out of the neighborhood until after their children had completed eighth grade. When a focus group of parents was asked whether they knew anyone who moved into the community because of the school, they simultaneously responded, "Oh, yes!" More to the point, one of the parents continued:

That's where the waiting list comes in, because we have people that move into the community so they can get their kids into the school. That's the exciting part of the whole deal here.

*Successful Leadership in High Poverty Schools*

A preliminary analysis of census figures from 1990 and 2000 reveals several demographic changes that support our anecdotal evidence that people may be moving to the community to gain access to Fraser for their children. First, the total population of youngsters age 5-14 (the age cohort of students attending Fraser) grew 51% in the school's neighborhood as compared to just a 5% increase for the city, 9% for the county, 16% for the state and 17% for the nation (Table 8).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the age cohort 15-18 grew faster in the Fraser neighborhood than elsewhere, suggesting some holding power as a result of attendance at the school.

(Table 8 - about here)

The second measure considered is the composition of households having one or more youngsters under age 18. We found that between 1990-2000, the number of family households with one or more persons under age 18 grew 24% in the school's neighborhood as compared to a 6.6% decline in the city, a meager .3% increase for the county, an 8.9% increase for the state and a 13.2% increase for the nation (Table 9). In contrast, the percent changes for non-family households is considerable lower in the school than in the comparison sites (2.6% for the school as compared to 12.1% for the city), suggesting that the increase in the community's school age population has occurred primarily in family households, which bodes well for increased neighborhood stability. This notion is buttressed by the school's zero percent student transient rate in 2002/03.

(Table 9 - about here)

(Table 10 - about here)

Household income was the last measure we used. Table 10 reveals the greatest income growth in the community were households with incomes \$50000-\$99999 which increased 109% as compared 69% in the city, 60% in the county, 31% in the state and 70% in the nation for households in the same income category. Although incomes are improving, Fraser has not become an affluent neighborhood. From 1990-2000, the median household income in the community increased only 16% (from \$23500-\$27400) as compared 33% for the city, 38% for the county, 42% for the state and 40% for the nation. In absolute terms, the community's median household income in 2000 barely exceeded that of the city (\$27400 to \$24500), but lagged well behind that of the county (\$38600), state (\$43400) and nation (\$42000). In other words, the census data indicates that while the aggregate wealth of the community continues to lag behind most other areas, there appears to be a positive shift in household wealth, an increase in the percentage of families with one or more youngsters under age 18 and a disproportionately large increase in the percentage of school age youngsters in the community. If we consider these findings in relation to the anecdotal evidence gleaned from our interviews, we begin to see the possibility for making the case that school improvement may be sowing the seeds for urban renewal in the Fraser community.

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<sup>3</sup> For more details about the demographic changes in the Fraser community see Jacobson et al. 2003.

### **Summary Case Study 3: Fraser Academy**

Of the three cases in our study, Fraser Academy is the only one that can be called successful in absolute as well as relative terms. The success of Fraser Academy resulted from the leadership of a principal who parlayed the autonomy and resources provided by a school/business partnership to foster the conditions needed to break out of a cycle of despair that had overtaken this formerly troubled school.

Assuming the leadership of an under achieving school immediately placed the principal under the same professional accountability pressures as her colleagues at Costello and Hamilton. But, in addition to accountability for improved instruction, the school's high visibility partnership with the bank placed Fraser's principal under the additional pressure of market and management accountability from the bank, the district and the public. In response, the principal consciously chose to model her own belief system in hopes of influencing teachers, support staff and parents to follow in the direction she planned to lead them. She modeled the respectful and caring behaviors that she expected towards students, teachers and parents. She modeled engagement with parents and the community, and how to treat their concerns with respect. She modeled instructional leadership by being a regular presence in hallways and classrooms, and she passed on the benefits of her own on-going professional development from courses she attended and books and articles she read with her staff. She modeled accessibility through her "open door" policy, and demonstrated her willingness to listen to and respect the views of all members of the school community. But most importantly, she modeled what success could look like if the school community learned to do things differently, and she had a prior track record that proved it worked.

Over time, parents and teachers learned to trust in her deeply held belief that all children can and will learn. They learned from her how to communicate more openly about student learning, and how to become more active learners themselves. Parents responded to the principal because she was accessible, listened and cared. They respected her for being a strong advocate for their children and for working so hard to help them create a brighter future for their community. Teachers responded to the principal because she was an experienced instructional leader willing to enhance their professional learning. She restructured the school to facilitate learning through teamwork, collaborative planning and shared decision-making, which distributed leadership to teachers so they could better understand and address their own professional learning needs.

Her influence on those she's worked with is quite profound and her legacy should continue for the foreseeable future. More than half the teachers interviewed stated that the positive role model she provided affected both their professional practice and career aspirations, "One of the things I've noticed since I've been here is that once you see wonderful leadership, you think you can emulate it. There's been a few people in the building who have succeeded and has gone that path". The principal at Hamilton was one such individual, and at least four other Fraser teachers have also gone on to complete the LIFTS program at UB, and are now serving as principals or assistant principals, most in high poverty schools

## **V. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Common Themes**

When looking across the cases presented, it should be immediately apparent that all three principals are exemplary leaders who have set and maintained a purpose and direction for their schools and exerted a very strong, positive influence on people's willingness to follow their lead. Moreover, all three exhibited the core skills that Leithwood and Riehl (2003) contend are necessary for school success. Each, in her own way, set a clear course that encouraged a sense of common purpose within their respective school community. At each site, the mission was made explicit, and in each case the school's mission was that the needs of children were paramount and that everyone would work together to improve the life chances of their students. By word and deed, these three women made it obvious to all around them that, henceforth, all school decisions and practices would have to pass a litmus test of whether they were good for kids and improved their learning.

These were not merely rhetorical flourishes intended to impress their new constituencies. Rather, they were articulations of deeply held beliefs, and the depth of those beliefs became more apparent over time. Given that children's needs were paramount, the first step each principal took was to make sure that students felt safe and cared for and that they were provided a secure, nurturing environment, so that they could comfortably avail themselves of the opportunity to learn.

In all three cases, the principal began her tenure by physically securing the building. This included limiting access to the school and screening visitors. It also meant more careful scrutiny of who had access to classrooms and when it was appropriate to enter, so as not to disrupt instruction. These security initiatives were coupled with efforts to make the school more inviting to children and adults alike. In essence, while doors were being locked, the school was actually more open than in the past, so long as your purpose in coming to school passed the aforementioned test of being in the interest of children.

Creating a safe, inviting environment required each principal to become a very visible presence at key times during the day, especially arrival and dismissal, when she could personally greet her students, their parents, and other community members. This was an important symbolic gesture because each of these schools was coming dangerously close to being a "frontier culture," and many of those enduring this sense of lawlessness were crying out for someone to re-establish control and cohesion. To carry the metaphor further, standing at the schoolhouse door sent the clear message that a new sheriff was in town, one that would greet you with a smile, but would hold you accountable for your actions. These symbolic behaviors didn't just start and end the day, nor were they window dressing intended mainly for the community outside of school. These principals also made their presence felt in the hallways, classrooms, auditoriums, lunchrooms and gyms. Each was signaling to her teachers, support staff and, most importantly, students, that she were fully aware of what was going on in the school, and watching to be sure that everyone was performing at the high levels expected of them. This presence was not intended to intimidate or coerce. Quite the contrary, the intention was to reassure – reassure teachers that student indiscipline would not be tolerated and reassure students that



they would be treated with respect and kindness. In all three cases, we heard these women described as the mothers of their respective school community; mothers who want the very best for their family and children; mothers who will work and even fight to get them the resources they need; mothers quick to praise appropriate behavior, but not afraid to discipline tactfully when they know it's in their child's or family's best interest. And, like a good mother, their visibility created a two-way visual dialogue in which they were simultaneously watching and being watched. Members of the school community scrutinized how they handled themselves in various circumstances and under different conditions. What they saw in each case was behavior that modeled commitment to the core beliefs they were trying to instill, i.e., if we work together in the service of improving the life chances of our children, we can succeed. We heard repeatedly from every one of the groups interviewed, including the students, that the principal's role modeling was the most defining aspect in their commitment to following her lead. Her commitment became their commitment, her expectations became their expectations and her mission became theirs as well. Being mothers themselves, especially African American mothers in predominantly African American communities may have created more trust, empathy and affiliation for these three principals, particularly with students and parents, than if, for instance, they had been white males. But ultimately, it was how they comported themselves and not their gender or race that influenced others to follow.

Because we studied only high poverty schools, we cannot say whether the commonality in direction setting we observed is peculiar to high poverty schools, or just these three. It seems quite possible that school improvement initiatives in communities where safety and security have not been compromised to the extent they were in our cases, would not require the same starting point. However, we believe that creating a safe, nurturing, child-centered environment IS a necessary first step in schools confronting the conditions found at our sites. We also believe that these initial steps are not sufficient to complete the task of improving student performance.

Creating the right environment should be seen as setting the table for improved student learning. All three principals understood that. They also understood that children and adults have to believe that the goals being set for them are attainable and that they will be provided the resources and development needed to achieve those goals. All three principals recognized the barriers to learning and academic achievement that poverty can produce, but none would allow these conditions to be used as excuses for poor performance. Poverty may be the current reality of many of these children's lives, but it need not be the final determinant of their futures. This was the message that all three principals instilled in their students and faculty. They knew that if people are going to be expected to improve their performance, they needed opportunities to build their intellectual and experiential capacity so that they would have a legitimate chance to succeed. Although one may be poor economically, they can be rich in spirit and effort.

To promote professional development and provide individualized and collective support for their staff, the principals used whatever fiscal and material resources they had available. They also role modeled

best instructional practices and, where ever possible, redesigned organizational structures, policies and practices to facilitate the higher level of performance they expected. Central to these organizational changes was the desire to strengthen school cultures and build collaborative processes. Sometimes changes were met with resistance. As the cases reveal, these were the times when the principal's commitment and persistence were tested. On occasion, tough decisions had to be made and people 'encouraged' to transfer. There is an old adage in human resources administration that there are only two ways to change the people you supervise, you can either: 1) change the people, or 2) change the people. In the first instance, change means eliciting new behaviors from existing staff, which was each of the principal's preferred approach as demonstrated by professional development opportunities being made available to faculty. But if this first order change didn't work or was resisted, then the second was instituted and the person was asked to leave. Although these were not pleasant experiences, the principals felt that when an individual was no longer working in service to the school mission, it was not a difficult decision to replace them, once attempts at professional development had been exhausted.

### Contextual Differences

As noted at the beginning of this section, commonalities across cases are immediately apparent, but so too are some key differences. Among the 'big ideas' about leadership presented in the first section of the report were two interrelated points: 1) that leadership requires social relationships: and 2) that it is contextual and contingent. How each of these women interacted with others and the social relationships that define their 'style' of leadership, as well as the particulars of the context and the circumstances of the schools they inherited are the keys to understanding these differences.

The principal at Fraser was arguably the most advantaged of the three principals, entering her situation with the supplemental resources of a committed bank partner and a level of decision-making autonomy (and a salary) that her peers in the district could only envy. Most importantly, she came to the task with a wealth of prior experience as a principal and a track record of success. She knew what she was getting into and how she intended to address it. She was a polished administrator who had confidence in her ability to turn around the school. The reputation and myths that preceded her to the district gave the community a level of confidence they might not have had otherwise. While all three principals had to deal with professional, decentralization and management approaches to accountability, she was the only one of the three principals who also confronted the pressure of market accountability because the bank was specifically looking for someone who could compete successfully for students (as a post-script, Fraser has become a public charter school as of the 2004/05 school year). This was an additional burden she knew about and was comfortable shouldering when she accepted the position.

Now contrast the circumstances at Fraser with those faced by the Hamilton principal, who had no prior experience leading a building when she was given her baptism under fire in a school under registration review. Nowhere was professional accountability so pronounced as in Hamilton. It would be hard to imagine

a worse scenario for a first time principal. Fortunately, the circumstances at Hamilton mirrored those she'd witnessed during her years she worked at Fraser. She had seen first-hand the steps the Fraser principal had taken to turn around that school, so he had a good blueprint to follow. Nevertheless, it's hard to picture the Hamilton community having much confidence when they heard a novice administrator had been selected to lead their school's improvement initiative.

This particular problem speaks to the shortage in high quality leadership, one of the key issues that underlie this study. It begs the question of why one of New York's 'Big Five' city school districts had to turn to an individual with no prior experience to lead a school out of the academic depths that Hamilton had reached. Were there no experienced principals in or outside of the district willing to take on the task? Were there no incentives that could be used to attract someone to this position? When Fraser, another underperforming school in the same district, needed a new leader, the school's bank partner launched a national search and used monetary incentives to get the right principal. But, when it came to Hamilton, a school without the additional resources of a business partner, the district was forced to use its traditional recruitment and selection practices to pick the best candidate willing to take on the task. In this situation, the district was lucky to have found a talented and committed individual. The sharp contrast in the circumstances surrounding these two hires suggest two policy recommendations that will be elaborated on in the next section: 1) the need for careful succession planning to fill leadership vacancies, especially in under performing schools; and 2) the need for differential incentives that can be used to attract experienced principals who have a proven record of success in similar settings.

Marked differences in school enrollments and student demographic diversity are also important because contextual variations affected the organizational complexity these school leaders had to confront. Tables #1, 3 and 5 reveal that in terms of enrollment, at 800+ students, Costello is far and away the largest of the three schools, being almost the size of Hamilton (350+) and Fraser (500+) combined. In terms of racial and ethnic student characteristics, Costello is also far more diverse (56% African-American, 30% Caucasian, 6% Asian American, 5% Hispanic and 3% Native American) than either Hamilton or Fraser, which have extremely homogeneous student bodies, with African American populations of 98% and 97% respectively. Both of these contextual factors may slow or impede a principal's ability to redesign the organization and/or communicate with her school community. For example, in our interviews we heard about the instructional advantages of the small class sizes found at Hamilton and the ability of the Fraser principal to modify the schedule to allow small group remedial instruction, even though that school's average class size was above the district average. At Costello, class size was, on average, only marginally bigger than at Hamilton (19 as compared to 17) and, in fact, smaller than at Fraser (19 as compared to 23). But average class size can be misleading from the perspective of organizational complexity. With a faculty of 56 teachers, the Costello principal had to supervise and coordinate the work of a faculty 30% larger than at Fraser (43 teachers) and 55% larger than at Hamilton (33%). This broader span of control increases complexity in such things as

scheduling and communication. For example, trying to modify a master schedule for a large faculty, in order to create time for common planning, committee work and small student groupings, is far more complicated than for a smaller faculty. All other things being equal, larger faculty size also reduces the opportunity for as many individual contacts a principal can have with her staff. Similarly, engaging a considerably larger parent community reduces the opportunity for the principal to hold as many one-on-one meetings with parents, and, given the greater racial and ethnic diversity of the Costello community, increases the potential for miscommunications due to differences in cultural cues.

There is a growing body of research that indicates that children, especially those struggling academically, benefit from being in smaller schools, due primarily to the increased likelihood of having a close, personal relationship with at least one adult (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). We believe that the same benefits can accrue to a smaller faculty and school community, especially in terms of increasing the likelihood of developing a closer, personal relationship with the school leader. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) contend that at the elementary level, the optimum size is 250-300 students. By that measure, we would assume that in Fraser and Costello, where enrollments are respectively double and triple the optimal figure, the organizational complexity confronted by the principals increased accordingly. Although, the issue of school size was not a factor we focused on in this study, we believe it did have an impact on the relative effectiveness of these three principals, and is a factor that should be examined in far greater detail in future research.

## Policy Recommendations

### **Recommendations for succession planning and recruitment in high poverty schools**

As mentioned in the section above, our first policy recommendation is that districts need to be more attentive to the processes of succession planning and school leadership recruitment. Having the example of two high poverty/low performing schools from the same district, each seeking to hire a new principal, puts this issue into sharp contrast. In the case of Fraser, the district had the advantage of the resources of a bank partner to run a national search and offer sufficient incentives (salary and decision making autonomy) to attract an outstanding, veteran school leader with experience turning around a school in an equally challenging setting. In the case of Hamilton, additional recruitment resources were not available. As a consequence, the school wound up confronting registration review led by a first year principal. As it turned out, this was an outstanding novice principal who had learned about school leadership at the feet of a master, the principal at Fraser. But this good fortune on the part of the district was more a case of serendipity than thoughtful succession planning. Indeed, one might argue that it is unconscionable to put someone with so little experience into such a daunting situation.

We recommend that districts use whatever leverage and resources they have available to make these relatively 'unattractive' positions more attractive to veteran administrators with successful experience in school improvement. In addition to searching outside the district, careful identification of select internal

candidates should begin as soon as it is known a position will come vacant. This might include grooming a candidate for an anticipated retirement. If needed, differential pay increments and regulatory waivers providing greater decision-making autonomy could be negotiated into the principal's contract (much in the way they were at Fraser). In the case of a school under registration review, the State should get more actively involved in principal recruitment and help the district financially, if additional resources are needed to get the right person.

### **Recommendations for leadership preparation and practice in high poverty schools**

Although we have an understanding of the core skills school leaders need to contribute to the improvement of student learning, we know less about how these individuals acquire the practical application of these skills, other than the fact that they probably received formal administrator preparation at one the many programs in New York State. The State recently required all programs that prepare School Building Leaders, School District Leaders and School District Business Leaders to be recertified. The guidelines used for program recertification were built upon the framework of nine Essential Knowledge and Skills for Effective School Leadership developed by the Blue Ribbon Panel on School Leadership (NYSED, 2001). Although these nine skills<sup>4</sup> nicely complement and elaborate the basic core skills our study examined, they are, like the skill set identified by Leithwood and Riehl, essentially context neutral, i.e., they are considered necessary and operative in any and all settings.

We would recommend that in developing these skills, preparation programs give particular consideration to how they apply in high poverty schools, whether in urban, small city and/or rural settings. Aspiring school leaders need to understand the extent to which these essential skills are mediated by context, especially in those schools confronting the greatest challenges. It is recommended that the State encourage all preparation programs to seek internship placements for their students, whenever possible, in high poverty schools for at least part of the newly required 600 hour capstone, clinical experience. Moreover, these clinical placements should be in schools with leaders who have a proven record of success in improving student achievement, so that aspiring administrators, much like the principal at Hamilton, have an initial road map they can use in the future.

The idea of creating high quality clinical placements in high poverty schools should not be reserved only for aspiring administrators. A State sponsored mentoring program should be developed by which current

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1. Leaders know and understand what it means and what it takes to be a leader
2. Leaders have a vision for schools that they constantly share and promote
3. Leaders communicate clearly and effectively
4. Leaders collaborate and cooperate with others
5. Leaders persevere and take the "long view"
6. Leaders support, develop and nurture staff
7. Leaders hold themselves and others responsible and accountable
8. Leaders never stop learning and honing their skills
9. Leaders have the courage to take informed risks

principals have the opportunity to observe first-hand, the practice of exemplary practicing school leaders, such as those in this study, or by giving exemplary leaders the a chance to visit and consult in struggling schools (this second option might be particularly attractive to recently retired successful school leaders).

### **Recommendations for future research**

If we are to get a true sense of the generalizability if this study's findings, research into successful school leadership in high poverty schools needs to be expanded to include more sites of varying size, with male and female principals of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, in more parts of the state (the present study was conducted exclusively in western New York) including rural, as well as urban and small city schools. There also needs to be a longitudinal component built into this research to help policymakers better understand: 1) how school improvement and the leadership practices that support it evolve over time; and, 2) the factors that need to be considered in terms of sustaining improvement after the first successful leader leaves.

We believe the issue of sustainability is especially important because school improvement cannot be dependent upon one person. As a post-script to the present study, the principal at Costello retired at the end of the 2003/04 school year and the principal at Hamilton was transferred (or requested a transfer) to another school in the same district at the start of 2004/05. Whether these two schools continue to improve academically is something that should be monitored using the state report cards, but their potential for continued improvement may be inhibited by the fact that during the period we were collecting data, there was no evidence at either school that succession planning was going on in anticipation of a change in leadership. The consequence of unplanned leadership succession is worthy of additional research.

Finally, the effect of school improvement on a local economy, particularly with regard to changes in real property value, is an extremely important topic for further study. Preliminary findings from Fraser suggest the school's improvement began to attract families with school age children to the community. An influx of new homeowners could potentially drive up property values and increase the funding base of the school district. In the case of a high needs community like Fraser, these demographic changes could signal the beginning of urban renewal. Currently, there is a dearth of literature on the potential relationship between investments in school improvement and sustainable community revitalization, thus making this a research area particularly ripe for further examination.

### **Closing Comments**

Our research team would like to thank the principals, teachers, support staff, parents and students at Costello, Hamilton and Fraser for allowing us the chance to enter your schools and your lives. Your openness and honesty enabled us to gain insights into the important work you do. We hope that this report accurately reflects what you shared with us during our interviews, and more importantly, proves useful in helping to inform your future practice, and the practice of other schools working towards improving student

performance.

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**VII. Tables**

**Case Study 1: Costello Elementary**

**Table 1 - Costello / District Demographic Comparisons (2002-03)**

PreK - 5	School	District
Enrollment	800+	8,000+
Demographics (%)	(%)	(%)
Caucasian	30	58
African American	56	35
Hispanic	5	2
Native Amer., Asian, Pacific Islander	9	5
Average Class Size	19	20
Free or Reduced Lunch (%)	81	54

Data source: New York State Education Department 2002-2003 State Report Cards

**Table 2 – Costello and Similar schools 4<sup>th</sup> grade ELA & Math scores (1998/99 – 2002/03)**

4th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Costello		Similar Schools		Costello		Similar Schools	
Year	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	51	49	69	31	33	67	47	52
99-00	40	70	53	47	32	67	43	57
00-01	42	58	47	53	31	69	36	64
01-02	32	69	44	56	36	63	36	64
02-03	45	55	40	60	31	69	24	77

Data source: New York State Education Department 2002-2003 State Report Cards

**Case Study 2: Hamilton Academy**

**Table 3 - Hamilton / District Demographic Comparisons (2002/03)**

PreK – 8	School	District
Enrollment	350+	40,000+
Demographics (%)	(%)	(%)
Caucasian	1	27
African American	98	58
Hispanic	1	12
Native Amer., Asian, Pacific Islander	0	3
Average Class Size	17	21
Free or Reduced Lunch (%)	100	74

Data source: New York State Education Department 2002-2003 State Report Cards

**Table 4 - Hamilton 4<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA & Math scores (1998/99 – 2002/03)**

4th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Hamilton		Similar Schools		Hamilton		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	45	56	74	26	36	64	52	49
99-00	88	12	63	37	76	24	56	44
00-01	71	30	65	35	55	45	57	42
01-02	67	33	63	37	50	50	60	40
02-03	65	35	62	38	38	63	44	56
8th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Hamilton		Similar Schools		Hamilton		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	92	8	74	26	91	8	84	17
99-00	100	0	84	16	94	6	86	14
00-01	87	13	79	20	96	4	85	15
01-02	89	11	85	15	94	5	81	20
02-03	80	20	81	18	55	44	68	32

Data source: New York State Education Department 2002-2003 State Report Cards

**Case Study 3: Fraser Academy**

**Table 5 – Fraser / District Demographic Comparisons (2002/03)**

K – 8	School	District
Enrollment	500+	40,000+
Demographics (%)	(%)	(%)
Caucasian	1	27
African American	97	58
Hispanic	1	12
Native Amer., Asian, Pacific Islander	1	3
Average Class Size	23	21
Percent Free or Reduced Lunch (%)	83	74

Data source: New York State Education Department 2002-2003 State Report Cards

**Table 6 – Fraser 4<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA & Math scores (1998/99 – 2002/03)**

4th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Fraser		Similar Schools		Fraser		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	72	28	74	26	40	61	52	49
99-00	52	48	63	37	13	87	56	44
00-01	59	41	63	37	28	72	51	49
01-02	47	54	61	39	40	60	55	44
02-03	44	56	59	41	5	95	39	61

  

8th Grade	English Language				Math			
	Fraser		Similar Schools		Fraser		Similar Schools	
	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4	1 & 2	3 & 4
98-99	60	41	74	26	56	44	84	17
99-00	82	18	84	16	56	44	86	14
00-01	66	34	82	18	26	73	87	13
01-02	85	16	85	14	18	82	79	21
02-03	70	30	82	17	30	70	77	23

Data source: New York State Education Department 2002-2003 State Report Cards

**Table 7 - Student transient rates by school 1999-2003**

School	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Costello	0	0	1	4
Hamilton	0	10	25	22
Fraser	8	0	6	0

Data source: New York State Education Department 2002-03  
Comprehensive Information Reports

**Table 8: Age cohort differences in 1990-2000**

Age cohort	School	City	County	State	Nation
5 – 14	51.2%	5.0%	8.9%	16.2%	17.1%
15 – 18	42.8%	-1.3%	6.1%	7.5%	16.2%

Data source: U.S. Census 1990 & 2000

**Table 9: Differences in households with persons under age 18 1990-2000**

1+ persons under 18	School	City	County	State	Nation
Family Households	24.0%	-6.6%	0.3%	8.9%	13.2%
Non-Family House.	2.6%	12.1%	31.4%	21.4%	18.3%

Data source: U.S. Census 1990 & 2000

**Table 10: Differences in household income 1990-2000.**

Income level	School	City	County	State	Nation
\$15,000-\$24,999	-16.9%	-15.3%	-19.4%	-17.7%	-16.0%
\$25,000-\$49,999	-29.5%	-1.3%	-13.3%	-11.5%	-0.1%
\$50,000-\$99,999	109.1%	68.7%	59.8%	30.7%	69.6%

Data source: U.S. Census 1990 & 2000

## **VIII. Appendix**

### **Principal Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about the student population in your school. Describe why it is a challenging population. (Prompt with specifics if necessary, e.g. diversity, low SES, etc.) Describe the neighborhood surrounding the school. Are the students mainly from the community?
2. What is particularly challenging about educating this student population? What is most difficult for you? What is easiest? Why?
3. Do you feel equipped to deal with this student population? Why? What have you had to learn? How did you learn what you needed to know? (e.g. from colleagues, parents, students, teachers, community, diversity board consultant)?
4. What form do NYS accountability/reform initiatives take in your school? (e.g. standards, test, SBDM, new curriculum, others).
5. How does the student population impact particularly in your implementation of these accountability initiatives? Can you give me specific examples? What are you doing differently here than what you would be doing in a school with a less needy population?
6. Does the state or district accountability context constrain or assist your ability to respond effectively to the need of your student population? Give examples.
7. Need to make sure we have included indicators of success. Do you think your school is successful? How do you account for your success? (Probe for values, skills, dispositions) What are the factors contributing to your success? (Find out how the principal is defining success. Ask particularly for student outcomes. If it hasn't come up spontaneously ask about school culture, e.g. extent of collaboration.)
8. What do you do to encourage student, parent, and community involvement? How much is there? What form does it take?
9. What do you do to encourage teacher leadership? How much is there? What form does it take?
10. How has the school developed over the past few years?
11. What plans do you have for the near future for the school?

### **Teacher Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about the student population in your school. Do you consider it a challenging population? (Prompt with specifics if necessary, e.g. diversity). Describe the neighborhood surrounding the school. Are the students mainly from the community?
2. What is particularly challenging about educating this student population? What is the most difficult for you? Why? What is easiest? Why?

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3. Do you feel equipped to deal with this student population? Why?
  - a. How did you learn what you needed to know (e.g. from colleagues, parents, students, teachers, community, board consultant)?
  - b. How much interaction do you have with colleagues around these issues?
4. How has your school responded to NYS or your district's accountability reform initiatives? (e.g., standards, testing, SBDM, others).
5. How does the student population impact particularly in your implementation of these accountability initiatives? Can you give me specific examples? What are you doing differently here than what you would be doing in a school with a different population?
6. Does the state or district accountability context constrain or assist your ability to respond effectively to the needs of your student population?
7. Do you feel that your school is successful in meeting the needs of the students? Why or why not? If yes, how do you account for your school's success? What are the factors contributing to your school's success? How do you define success (e.g., student outcomes)? If no, ask for explanations.
8. If the principal has not been mentioned as a factor, ask, "How does the principal contribute to successful outcomes?" Probe for practices, values, initiatives, his/her professional development, skills, dispositions and gender.
  - a. If you were appointed principal of this school, what would you change?
9. To what extent do you interact with parents? What form does the interaction take: What role does the principal play in encouraging parent involvement?
10. How much teacher leadership is there in your school? What form does it take? What role does your principal play in encouraging teacher leadership?
11. For teachers who have been at the school for a few years: How has the school changed over time: What has been helpful? Explain how. What hasn't been helpful? Explain. What has the principal done?
12. Can you relate a story of a successful school initiative (especially one in which the principal played a key role)?
13. Is there anything else you want to say about how your principal contributes to your school's response to state or district's accountability initiatives?
14. Have you considered becoming an administrator? If not, why not?

If you have not asked these questions, please do!

How many years have you been teaching?

How many years have you taught at this school?)

**Support Staff Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about the student population in your school. Do you consider it a challenging population?

(Prompt with specifics if necessary, e.g. diversity). Describe the neighborhood surrounding the school. Are the students mainly from the community?

2. What is particularly challenging about educating this student population?  
What is the most difficult for you? Why? What is easiest? Why?
3. Do you feel equipped to deal with this student population? Why? What have you had to learn?  
How did you learn what you needed to know (e.g. from colleagues, parents, students, teachers, community, board consultant)?
4. Do you feel that your school is successful in meeting the needs of the students? Why or why not? If yes, how do you account for your school's success (e.g., student outcomes)? If no, ask for explanations.
5. If the principal has not been mentioned as a factor, ask, How does the principal contribute to successful outcomes? Probe for practices, values, initiatives, his/her professional development, skills, dispositions and gender.
6. To what extent do you interact with parents? What form does the interaction take: What role does the principal play in encouraging parent involvement?
7. How much teacher leadership is there in your school? What form does it take? What role does your principal play in encouraging teacher leadership?
8. Can you tell me about your interactions with the principal? What are the occasions for your interactions with the principal? What are they like? Do you think all of the support staff feels the same way as you do?
9. For support staff who have been at the school for a few years: How has the school changed over time: What has been helpful? Explain how. What hasn't been helpful? Explain. What has the principal done?
10. Can you relate a story of a successful school initiative (especially one in which the principal played a key role)?

If you have not asked these questions, please do!

How many years have you been working in your position?

How many years have you worked at this school?)

### **Parent Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about the student population in your school. Do you consider it a challenging population?  
(Prompt with specifics if necessary, e.g. diversity). Describe the neighborhood surrounding the school. Are the students mainly from the community?
2. In your opinion, what is particularly challenging about educating this student population?
3. Do you feel that the school is serving the needs of the students? Why? Why not?

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4. What are the indications of success? What does the principal do to contribute to the success (or lack of it)? (Probe for specific practices, values, initiatives and professional development.)
    - a. If there were something you could change about the principal, what would it be?
  5. How much parent involvement is there in this school? What kind of involvement is there? Is there any way that parent involvement could be improved?
  6. What does the principal do to encourage parent involvement? What do the teachers do to encourage parent involvement?
  7. How has your school responded to the state or district accountability/reform initiatives required in your school? (e.g., standards, testing, others).
    - a. How does this student population affect how your school is responding to those initiatives?
    - b. How does the principal influence the response to the accountability initiatives?
  8. What is the role of the SBDM team in this school?  
Can you give me some examples of the things the SBDM has done?
  9. How does the principal influence the working of the SBDM team?
  10. Is there any way the SBDM team could be improved?
  11. Ask the parent to relate a success story or two.
-