THE LEARNING
Principal

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Staying focused

Chattanooga school rises to the challenge through the Benwood Initiative

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Hardy Elementary School was once literally at the bottom.

In 2000, with only 15.1% of its 3rd graders reading at grade level, Hardy had the worst reading performance in the Hamilton County School District and among the worst in Tennessee. It was threatened with a state takeover because of its low achievement.

"We had a lot that we had to accomplish," said principal Natalie Elder, who arrived in 2001 as the principal charged with improving the Chattanooga school.

Today, Hardy is far from being at the bottom. After five years of work, nearly two-thirds of its 3rd graders read at grade level. Attendance is high and steady. The state of Tennessee considers it an "A" school in its value-added assessments because of the progress its students make each year. And it is no longer in danger of being taken over by the state.

As in many highly challenged schools, Hardy's work has involved substantial grit and determination. Unlike many, however, Hardy has been blessed with exceptional financial resources and external support. It is one of the nine Chattanooga schools that are part of the district's ambitious Benwood Initiative, a reform effort born out of the bad news in 2000. The initiative is named after the local Benwood Foundation which pledged $1 million a year for five years to support professional development in these schools.

Collectively, the Benwood schools have a remarkable record of improvement after five years. The achievement gap between those schools and other Hamilton County schools has narrowed significantly over that period.

Like the other Benwood schools, nearly all of Hardy's 630 students are black and poor. The school serves two housing projects in the central city and a substantial number of single-parent families. Many of the parents have only an 8th-grade education. Elder believes most parents are employed but their jobs are primarily in the low-wage, service sector.

Elder grew up in the Hardy neighborhood,

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Our goal: All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.

Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council

Find the trim tab

"The balance of circumstances can be shifted in a major way by a minor action. Only a few decisions really matter. Those that do, matter a great deal. Choice can always be exercised."

— Richard Koch

Fifteen years ago, I was profoundly influenced by Peter Senge's discussion of leverage and "trim tabs" in *The Fifth Discipline (*Doubleday Currency, 1990). These concepts provide school leaders with tools they can use to think in fresh ways about the most powerful means to achieve their goals.

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge wrote, "Small changes can produce big results — but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious" (p. 63). He used the term "leverage" to describe the "small, well-focused actions" that "can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they're in the right place. ... Tackling a difficult problem is often a matter of seeing where the high leverage lies, a change which — with a minimum of effort — would lead to lasting significant improvement" (p. 64).

Senge cites Buckminster Fuller's concept of a trim tab — "a small rudder on the rudder of a ship" whose function it is "to make it easier to turn the rudder which, then, makes it easier to turn the ship" (p. 64). When I approach my work now, I consider the rudder (a place of leverage) and the trim tab that makes it easier for me to affect the rudder.

Stephen Covey (2004) says a trim tab is a way "of taking initiative to expand your influence in every opportunity around you" (p. 118). He offers as an example the immense power of switching one's view from "they are the problem" to "I am the problem." "Remember that every time

you think the problem is out there, *that* very thought is the problem," he writes (p. 131).

To illustrate "trim tab thinking," I begin with the premise that a principal's instructional leadership is a "rudder" for improving the quality of teaching and learning in a school. Examples of "rudders on the rudder" include:

•   Examining the quality of student work during classroom visits rather than focusing exclusively on teacher actions;

•   Forming teachers into ongoing teams that create a small number of common instructional goals and in which participants assist one another in achieving them; and

•   Focusing at least a portion of faculty meetings on issues of teaching and learning.

Each trim tab might also be thought of as having its own rudder (a trim tab on a trim tab) that once "moved" affects all the processes to which it is connected. For instance, a school leader who has chosen as a trim tab "*Focusing at least a portion of faculty meetings on issues of teaching and learning"* might decide that a high-leverage way to begin some faculty meetings is with an update on his or her own learning goals and an honest appraisal of the challenges he or she faces in their achievement. Such vulnerability on the part of leaders can have a significant influence on establishing a climate for risk taking and experimentation that would spread throughout a school's other instructional improvement efforts.

Read more of Dennis Sparks' writings at www.nsdc.org/library/authors/sparks.cfm.

CONSIDER:
Identify a small number of actions that will have the greatest influence in the achievement of your most important goals.

REFERENCES

Covey, S. (2004). *The eighth habit: From effectiveness to greatness.* New York: Free Press.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Doubleday Currency.

Build the infrastructure first

I still hear many principals voice surprise when hearing that learning communities are not just one of the NSDC standards for staff development but the first one! Isn't the goal of professional development to improve the skills and knowledge of individual teachers, they reason? What does the structure and inner workings of the school have to do with that goal, they ask?

I recently heard Robert Marzano describe factors that influence student achievement. Schools, he said, need to develop a professional culture of collegiality and professionalism that promotes teachers' conversation about their work. Next to a highly effective teacher, the second most powerful factor in increased student achievement is an effective school.

Further, a culture of expertise evolves, according to Marzano, when there is continuous and focused feedback on teaching. Yet, those types of conversations are rare in most of the schools where he works. According to work about school culture, talking about instruction is a conversation that is *close to the bone* for most teachers (Lortie, 1975). So, a principal must do more than merely create the space for such conversations among faculty; he or she must also build an infrastructure that will support these powerful professional conversations.

The principal first needs to **prepare teachers for skillful collaboration**. Collaboration is still not a commonplace behavior among most faculties. Many teachers continue to report that their interactions with other faculty remain relegated to the lounge, by the mail boxes, and near copying machines. Staff members need to learn about collaboration as well as conflict resolution skills. While effective groups accomplish their goals, they also learn how to disagree with each other while maintaining working relationships.

Since most of this collegial work will occur in small groups, the principal **provides training and support to develop faculty members to be skilled facilitators who provide support during whole school and learning team meetings**. The knowledge and skills these facilitators develop include knowing about group process, group dynamics, the stages of group development and group decision making. Many times, adult groups need a trained facilitator who helps them do their best work and also teaches them how to work together effectively.

Secondly, the principal **ensures that the role of group facilitator becomes the responsibility of everyone and it rotates among members as the skill level of group members increases**. The principal increases the faculty's capacity to understand how to work as a group and develops shared leadership capacities within the faculty by asking everyone to serve as a group facilitator. This shared leadership strategy also builds collaborative relationships because no group member seems to have more power or influence as a result of being facilitator.

Building this infrastructure of collaborative skills is the first step in supporting teaching and learning. This background work creates a structure that supports professionalism and collaboration.

Learn more about the NSDC standards at www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm.

Learning Communities
Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

REFERENCES

Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Marzano, R. (2006). *Research-based practices to improve student achievement.* Presentation at the SMILE Conference, Sierra Vista, Ariz. January 27, 2006.

Marzano, R. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

MEETING BASICS

I f a groan is the typical response to your announcement of a meeting, consider going back to the basics to identify areas for improvement.

The first task for the convener of any meeting is to be clear about the reason for meeting:

1. Dispense information.
2. Make decisions on group issues.
3. Solve problems.
4. Create new options, visions, directions, and proposals.
5. Plan/strategize on group tasks.
6. Establish new governance procedures.
7. Air concerns.
8. Evaluation progress on work.
9. Invest in the group's learning and growth.
10. Celebrate successes (Champion, *Tools for Change Workshops*. NSDC, 1993).

■ **HAVE AN AGENDA** for every meeting. If there is an opportunity for others to suggest items for the agenda, distribute the Agenda Input form on Page 5 with a note inviting suggestions.

■ **DISTRIBUTE THE AGENDA** at least a week before the meeting. Note time, date, and place of meeting prominently on the agenda.

■ **LABEL EACH AGENDA ITEM** so participants understand how much input (and therefore preparation) is expected from them.

■ **SET STARTING AND ENDING TIMES.** Assign a time to each agenda item.

■ **PLACE AGENDA ITEMS** strategically. Items that will benefit from high energy should be near the top of the agenda.

■ **IDENTIFY A RECORDER** for each meeting, preferably a non-participant.

■ **IDENTIFY WHAT IS EXPECTED** to occur as a result of the meeting. This can be done in minutes that are distributed or in simple chart form similar to that on Page 5.

■ **EVALUATE EACH MEETING** as a group. Keep a record of the suggestions so you can improve your next meeting.

alternatives to meetings

ROUND ROBIN MEMOS
Write a memo. List the names of everyone who needs to see it. Circulate the memo to each person listed. Put your name last so the memo comes back to you.

FYI COPIES OF MINUTES/LETTERS/REPORTS
Copy and distribute with a short note.

E-MAIL
Can be read by recipient when convenient and revisited as needed.

INFORMAL CONVERSATION/HALL TALK
Happens more naturally. But some who need information may be overlooked.

ONE-TO-ONE CONVERSATIONS
Heightens the listener's sense of importance. Time consuming and may not be consistent.

TELEPHONE CALLS
Good way to gauge reactions as people hear what you have to say. Repetitive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES
Time saver for everyone except the writer.

BULLETIN BOARD MESSAGES
Easy. Difficult to determine if information has been seen by all who need it.

NEWSLETTERS/WEEKLY BULLETINS
Gets out information to a large group. Time intensive.

BROWN BAG LUNCHES
Voluntary. Not everyone who needs to be there can be counted on to be present.

Sources: *Keys to Successful Meetings* by Stephanie Hirsh, Ann Delehant, and Sherry Sparks (NSDC, 1991) and *Mining Group Gold* by Thomas Kayser (McGraw-Hill, 1995).

Agenda input

TOPICS OR IDEAS FOR THE _____
MEETING.

PLEASE SEND OR FAX TO:
Name _____
Address _____
Phone _____
Fax _____

DUE: No later than three days before _____
(the meeting date).

1. Place the following item on the agenda:

    _____

2. _____ will be
    available to lead the discussion.

3. Time needed: _____ minutes

4. Type of item:
    ☐ For Information
    ☐ For Discussion
    ☐ For Decision *(What type of decision is required?)*
    ☐ For Evaluation
    ☐ For Our Growth
    ☐ For Solution
    ☐ For Proposal
    ☐ For Airing Concerns
    ☐ For Fun
    ☐ Urgent
    ☐ Long Range

5. Non-group members who should be
    present for this discussion:
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

6. Signature: _____
    Print name: _____
    Date: _____

What do we do now?

COMMENTS TO FACILITATOR: Distribute a copy of this follow-up sheet to each participant along with the minutes of the meeting.

Group: _____
Date: _____
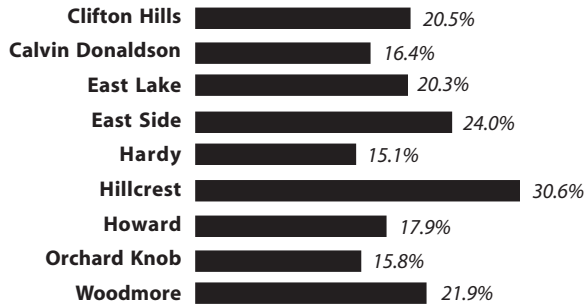**Summary:** _____
_____
Decisions reached: _____
_____

NEXT STEPS:

WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS?	WHEN IS IT DUE?

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THE BENWOOD SCHOOLS

2000

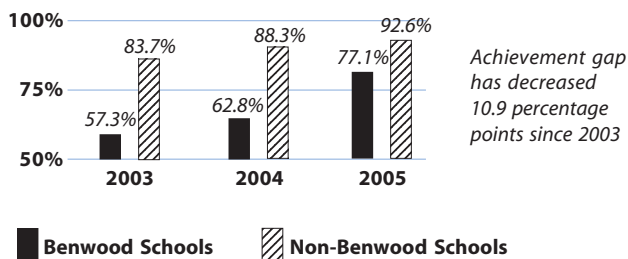Percentage of 3rd graders reading above or at grade level in the Benwood schools

School	Percentage
Clifton Hills	20.5%
Calvin Donaldson	16.4%
East Lake	20.3%
East Side	24.0%
Hardy	15.1%
Hillcrest	30.6%
Howard	17.9%
Orchard Knob	15.8%
Woodmore	21.9%

2005 Value-Added Scores

A=Exceptional; B=Exceeds State Growth Standard; C=Maintains State Growth Standard; D=Below State Growth Standard; F=Deficient

	Reading-Language	Math	Science	Social Studies
Donaldson	A	A	A	A
East Lake	A	A	A	A
Hardy	A	A	A	A
Hilllcrest	A	A	A	A
Howard	A	A	A	A
Orchard Knob	A	A	A	A
East Side	A	A	C	A
Woodmore	B	A	C	A
Clifton Hills	C	B	B	A

Eliminating the Achievement Gap in Reading/Language Arts for Benwood Schools

% of students scoring proficient or advanced on statewide assessment

	2003	2004	2005
Benwood Schools	57.3%	62.8%	77.1%
Non-Benwood Schools	83.7%	88.3%	92.6%

Achievement gap has decreased 10.9 percentage points since 2003

■ Benwood Schools ▨ Non-Benwood Schools

STAYING FOCUSED:

although she said it was a far different area when she was a child. "I have invested my life in this community," she said.

Her work as Hardy's principal began with the dual task of reconstituting the staff and working to ensure stability in the staff that she was creating. "I had visited the old Hardy and I was very concerned about the quality of the teachers. I feel that it's very important to get the right teachers into a building. I wanted to be sure that the adults standing in front of those children were people of quality," she said.

She was able to replace underperforming teachers because of Supt. Jesse Register's willingness to move about 100 teachers out of the Benwood schools and into suburban schools where he believed they would do less harm to students. (See the April issue of *The Learning System* for another story about the districtwide reform effort.)

In hiring new teachers, Elder said she looked at their knowledge and skills as well as their attitudes about the children they would be teaching. In her first year, she hired 30 new teachers, keeping only seven from the old Hardy and moving five from a K-2 building that merged with Hardy.

By the end of her first year, however, nine teachers left and eight left the next year. "Once they got in and rolled up their sleeves, they found this wasn't for them," Elder said. But, by year four, no teachers left Hardy.

Across all of the Benwood schools, the story of retention is the same, said Susan Swanson, the district's director of urban education. "We no longer have the bleeding from those schools that we once had," she said.

Elder makes no apologies for being very demanding of the staff. "My thing is this: Every child in this school is entitled to a free education, and no one has the right to infringe on that education and that includes the teachers," she said.

"To come here, you have to be 100% committed. It is stressful. It takes a lot of work. They have to really prepare. They have to get

Chattanooga school rises to the challenge

their priorities in order. The principals are walking constantly. If the delivery isn't correct, we are in there to show them," she said.

The first challenges for this combined staff were learning to work together and learning to understand the students they were teaching. "They have to understand that these are not middle-class children. We have to build a foundation for these children," Elder said.

"We had to have a lot of dialogue, and we had to develop a lot of trust before we could get to the point where teachers would demonstrate in front of their peers and talk about what was working," she said.

At the same time, however, Elder didn't feel like she could take much time to focus on team building when her students were facing a learning crisis. Teachers had to learn to get along and work together as they did the work that needed to be done in the building.

With the Benwood support, Elder was able to bring in a literacy consultant for 12 weeks during each of the first three years of the initiative, a remarkable investment in expertise for a highly challenged school. The consultant provided traditional classroom learning about literacy in order to ensure a consistent under-standing before moving into coaching teachers through demonstration lessons and observation.

That was coupled with a "consulting teacher," a fulltime staff development teacher in the building. That teacher is part of the leader-ship team in the school and works daily with teachers to analyze data and develop lessons. She frequently joins teachers in their daily 45-minute grade-level planning meetings.

Another significant piece of the literacy plan was providing a daily two-hour literacy block. During that block, no parents can visit class-rooms, no announcements are made, and no calls are routed to classroom telephones.

Elder believes one of Benwood's most significant impacts was teaching and encourag-ing the principals to do classroom walk-throughs every day. "They taught us how to focus on one small thing during the walk-throughs," she said. She debriefs daily with the assistant principal and consulting teacher who also do walk-throughs.

"I want teachers to know that I'm on top of what's happening in their classrooms," she said. "This is not a 'gotcha.' I want them to see me as a colleague who's coming in to help them make sure they're doing the right thing. I want to make sure that they get whatever they need to be an effective teacher. That's key to me. That's what I'm supposed to do as a principal. I'm not supposed to put out fires all day."

Another significant change in the school was its use of data to inform instruction. The district's director of data and accountability sat down with the Hardy staff repeatedly to help them refine their data skills, Elder said.

"Teachers were surprised when they saw the data. They assumed the kids were doing better than they were. When they see the data, they can see their own weaknesses. They can see that this kid and this kid and this kid did not master the skill. When they see that, they can't tell me it's because mama didn't help them with their homework," she said.

With the authority of the data, Elder could promote the need to change the delivery of instruction.

Elder still holds the 100% reading goal as her school's goal. But she also recognizes that her school has come a long way in five years. "Can you imagine being in a district where you are looked upon as being a low-performing school? Can you imagine how teachers in that building felt? We were looked upon as a dead weight," she said.

This year, she said, one of her proudest moments came when several of the Benwood principals were invited to present to other principals in the district.

"When someone calls you a low-performing school, who wants to listen to you? Now that they've seen our gain, they've seen our growth, now they're appreciating our worth," she said.

Swanson, the district's director of urban education, agrees. "They're no longer seen as the weak sisters. They're seen as the people who have been trained and have the expertise in how to improve schools," she said. ■

NATALIE ELDER'S TIPS TO OTHER URBAN PRINCIPALS

"Keep an open door to your teachers even if it hurts to hear what they say."

"Be consistent. You have to be very focused. You have to have a vision. You have to be very ethical in your beliefs. You have to have the courage to stand on your beliefs. You also have to know when to push forward and when to pull back. That takes a lot of finesse. And you have to pump up your staff to keep them coming in every day."

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A FEW REMINDERS

- **YOUR BALLOT FOR THE 2006 NSDC** Board of Trustees election arrived with your Spring issue of *JSD* last month. Those ballots must be postmarked by **April 15**. Bios for the four candidates are available in the members-only area of the web site — www.nsdc.org. You need your membership number (on the label below) and the password (learning) to access that area.

- **SAVE $65 BY REGISTERING** for the NSDC Summer Conference on School-Based Staff Development before **April 30**. Go to www.nsdc.org /connect/summerconference.cfm to download forms.

- **SAVE $75 IN REGISTRATION FEES** for the 2006 NSDC's Annual Conference in Nashville before **May 31**. Go to www.nsdc.org/conference06/earlybird.cfm to download the early bird registration form.

- **JOIN NSDC FOR BACK-TO-BACK WORKSHOPS** on Powerful Designs for Professional Learning and Moving Staff Development Standards into Practice on April 24-27 in Raleigh, N.C. Sign up now online at www.nsdc.org/connect/workshops.cfm.

- **IF YOU SELECTED THE PLUS OPTION** on your membership package, watch your mail for your next book, *Breakthrough,* by Michael Fullan, Peter Hill, and Carmel Crevola (Corwin, 2006). Those books will be mailed in early April.

  If you have not yet selected the Plus Option, you can still order *Breakthrough* and other books recommended for staff developers through the NSDC catalog which will be arriving in your mailboxes this month.
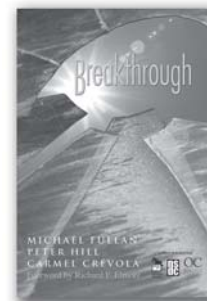
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