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Teachers hold the vision for a school

I'm about to say something that is likely to blow you away: Our teachers are passionate about our mission statement.

I'll bet you've never heard that before!

What's even more interesting is that our mission statement doesn't look any different than those hanging on the walls of schools across America. It reads, "Salem Middle School is a collaborative community that ensures high student achievement and values the unique needs of each learner." The difference is that our faculty mentally wrestled over exactly what our mission statement should say because we were committed to the idea that we were creating something more than a collection of clichés.

Our greatest challenge was the phrase "ensures high student achievement." Could we really "ensure" high student achievement, we wondered? Did we control enough of the variables in the lives of our students to literally guarantee that they would succeed?

In the end, we decided that it wasn't our job to simply teach and hope that students learned. We agreed to take ownership for learning, and we were jazzed! Our principal — who joined us as an equal participant in the conversation — announced that every action in our school should be taken with the word "ensures" in mind. "I will support your every decision," he said, "as long as you can demonstrate how it supports our mission."

Two years later, the word "ensures" continues to drive everything that we do at Salem. Instructional decisions are based on student achievement data. Questions asked in interviews determine the commitment of candidates to making certain that every child succeeds. Even cut-and-dried decisions like budgeting and scheduling are made with our mission in mind.

I didn't know how much our mission meant to our faculty until we found out in June that our principal was leaving for the local high school.

As soon as the announcement was made, panicked conversations became the norm in the workroom. "Leadership changes are never a good thing," one teacher shared. "New principals always come in and shake things up. So much for everything we've worked so hard to create. Out with the old and in with the new."

Only having experienced one leadership change in my career, I began asking colleagues from other schools about what we could expect.

Every teacher told me to prepare for drastic changes. The most oft-repeated advice, "Remember that this, too, shall pass. Learn to endure."

These answers left me with nothing but questions. Are teachers ever the vision-keepers in their schools, committed to a mission and a shared set of unchanging ideals regardless of leadership changes?

Can a school really be successful if they aren't?

Are we simply resigned to the notion that those outside of the classroom largely determine a school's direction? More importantly, what role can teacher leaders play in bridging the transition between administrators? How can we help to couple the life brought into our organization by a new principal with the significant investment that we've made into who we already are? ♦



INTRODUCING...

Bill Ferriter is 6th-grade social studies and language art teachers at Salem Middle School in Apex, N.C. With this issue of *T3*, he begins a monthly column about the challenges of being a teacher leader.

Ferriter is well-qualified to take up this work.

- He is a National Board Certified Teacher in middle childhood (generalist) and was Wake County Teacher of the Year for 2005 and North Carolina's North Central Region Teacher of the Year for 2006.
- He is a senior fellow for the Teacher Leader Network, a moderator for the North Carolina NBCT chat group, and a policy consultant for Teachers Solutions, a project of the Center for Teaching Quality in North Carolina.
- He has been a prolific blogger on issues related to teacher leadership. Please join us in welcoming him to these pages!