

LEADERS CAN ENSURE THAT ALL STUDENTS HAVE ACCESS TO QUALITY TEACHING

Deborah B. was one of the worst teachers I ever witnessed teaching. She began yelling at students from the moment they walked in the door. She threatened them and scowled at them — and they scowled right back, although most were too smart to talk back to an adult. When several of her 4th-grade students disrupted a science lesson she had prepared with a colleague, she told them they would not be allowed to study science for the rest of the year.

Her behavior didn't change even when I sat in the back of her gloomy classroom and took notes. Worse, she had been recommended to me by the school's principal as one of the better teachers in the school.

Deborah B. taught in an urban district that battled the triple stigmas of poverty, race, and poor academic performance. Throughout the school and the district, teachers and administrators voiced a common refrain: Students come from single-parent homes, if they have a parent at home at all. Parents don't care about education. They don't send their children to school on time and ready to learn. Students don't behave. They don't have good manners. They can't stay awake. They don't try. They fight.

The superintendent in her district acknowledged that he had quite a few teachers who weren't prepared for the challenges the students presented. But what was he to do? The children, he said, were so difficult to teach.

Is it any wonder that students in this district had consistently poor attendance, some of the lowest scores on statewide tests, low graduation rates, and a greater chance of drawing welfare than a paycheck after high school?

A COURAGEOUS ACTION

I believe that such poor teachers and weak leaders are a relative rarity in American schools. But I can't help thinking about Deborah B. and her superintendent whenever I hear about Jesse Register or another courageous educational leader who actively tries to ensure that every child is being taught by a highly effective teacher.

When Register was superintendent of Hamilton County Schools in Tennessee, the community learned that

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nine of the 20 lowest performing elementary schools in the state were in Chattanooga, right in the heart of the district. The news was especially hard to take because three other Tennessee cities had larger enrollments and more students living in poverty.

An embarrassed community joined forces and pledged to ensure that 3rd graders at the nine low-performing schools would read at grade level by 2006. A local foundation pledged \$100,000 a year for five years to assist those schools in achieving that goal. In 2000, none of the nine schools had more than one-third of 3rd graders reading at grade level. By 2005, 77% of the 3rd graders in those schools were reading at or above grade level. Attendance is up, and teacher turnover has dropped substantially.

Many forces were at work to achieve that change, but I believe a single courageous action by Register accounts for the mind shift that told educators — and important others — that the district would be serious about this effort.

Register's action was to ensure that every child had access to high-quality teaching.

The district's low-performing schools had too many ineffective teachers, he told me.

"In Chattanooga, teachers who weren't good enough to teach in schools where parents would notice were allowed to accumulate in the inner-city schools. Those schools became safe places for inadequate teachers, and over the years, a larger and larger number of ineffective teachers accumulated in those schools," Register said.

Although Register read test scores and other indicators, his personal observations of school culture and classroom teaching had the greatest impact on him. "I saw small classes with bad teachers who weren't taking advantage of the situation. There were very significant and disturbing differences in the quality of our schools," he said.

At a leadership retreat, Register told principals that Hamilton County would no longer tolerate a culture that enabled bad teaching in any of its schools. All principals, he said, were responsible for all children in the district. Principals could not escape this responsibility simply because the children who were assigned to their schools were more affluent and less at risk than other children.

Register told the principals that he was moving 100 ineffective teachers out of the low-performing schools and into the district's other schools. He was also recruiting the



In each issue of *JSD*, Joan Richardson writes about the relationship between professional learning and student learning. All of her articles and columns can be found at www.nsdc.org.

district's more effective teachers to replace them.

Any school, he said, could manage one or two ineffective teachers. Principals could help one or two weak teachers grow professionally, or they could counsel them out of the profession. But no school could function effectively with 12 or 15 such teachers. No principal working alone could provide enough substantial guidance and professional development to help that many teachers improve.

Everyone, he said, would have to share equally in this deficit because, in effect, everyone had helped to create it.

"You could have heard a pin drop in that room," he said.

But there were no objections from Hamilton County principals or parents. Register had laid the groundwork for this through several years of deep conversations about the meaning of effective schools. The teachers union worked with him to negotiate the transfer process, and no grievances resulted.

"We really wanted to change away from a culture that enabled poor teaching," he said.

Some of those ineffective teachers left the district immediately, some left later, and others managed to improve when they were placed in a different environment and got the intensive support they needed to improve.

Importantly, highly effective teachers were recruited into the once low-performing schools. "Teachers told us they were willing to go, but they wanted the opportunity to be successful. They wanted support, and they wanted colleagues who would work with them," he said.

Hamilton County addressed these concerns with incentive pay, recruiting clusters of teachers committed to working together, developing leadership teams within each school, and offering a generous dose of public praise for successful teachers.

Register shrugs off the accolades, although he acknowledges his pride in the achievements during his tenure. He retired from Hamilton County in June 2006 and is now a senior adviser for district leadership at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

WHICH KIND OF LEADER ARE YOU?

As a school leader, are you like the first superintendent? Or are you more like Jesse Register, courageously taking actions today that match the convictions that drew you into the profession in the first place?

School leaders who wonder whether they could lead changes similar to those in Hamilton County can begin with an honest review of the reality of their schools today. Walk through your schools. Sit in classrooms. Compare the differences in culture, teaching skills, and classroom expectations. Reflect honestly on whether you believe that every child in your district has the same access to learning, regardless of which classroom he or she sits in. Then ask yourself what you can do to make any needed changes.

No teacher gets up in the morning deciding to do a lousy job that day, and it's unlikely that any school leader has decided that he or she wants to have a low-performing school. But teachers who are ineffective often are resigned to their poor performance. Those who are neither capable of making a change nor understand that they need to change are the teachers who most require the support and guidance of principals and district leaders.

Anyone who has assumed the mantle of leadership in a school or district is responsible for ensuring that every student has quality teaching every hour of every day. If any student is not receiving that, school leaders are the ones — and the only ones — who can make it right. ■

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know the damage that the social and economic inequalities in society do to low-income children than the educators who see these children every day. So I think that faculty members have two roles to play. One is what they do inside their schools. But the other is what they do as citizens, and they need to be much more vocal about these issues that they alone have expertise in.

Haycock: In the end, I doubt that

Richard and I have horrible disagreements about the policy end, even though we have a tendency to focus on what separates us rather than what unites us. I will say, however, that when educators talk about these issues, they need to be very careful about what they convey. If you talk about the impossibility of getting poor kids or minority kids to high levels of achievement unless all these things take place in the outside world, you can, if you're not careful, convey a belief that you think the children's capacity is limited and that you

think they are essentially worth less than other children. The language is very, very important.

The core message in high-performing, high-poverty schools is one that we wish that all schools were better at spreading to kids, and that is that high achievement is mostly the result of sticking with it long enough to build the skills you need to succeed in the world. And you really see very deliberate efforts to teach kids that, to help them see how they can get ever better by investing more energy in their work. ■