

SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE ODDS DON'T BACK AWAY FROM A CHALLENGE

When veteran education writer Karin Chenoweth set out to explore schools that succeeded against the odds, she was especially surprised by one discovery.

"I knew I would find schools that had beaten the odds. But I worried about the cost in terms of the lives and the health of the teachers and principals. Would they be bitter, overworked, and just tired because of all of the effort?" she wondered.

Instead, she found just the opposite.

"These guys are pumping! They are so energetic and invigorated. They work very hard, but they are successful and that drives them to be more successful," she said.

Chenoweth found great respect and caring in each of the schools she documents in *It's Being Done* (Harvard Education Press, 2007), a collection of 15 stories about academic success in schools that serve large populations of children of color and those who live in poverty. "These schools are very respectful places. The principals are respectful of the teachers. The teachers are respectful of the students. The staff is respectful of the parents. The culture is very nice. They are very pleasant places to be," she said.

"You know what it's like to be in a dysfunctional school. There are a lot of angry people. It's very dispiriting and tiring. These are not angry schools," she said.

Chenoweth has been in high-poverty schools that don't succeed with kids but try to help the teachers be happy by accommodating their wants. "If you want to make schools nice for grown-ups, then you let the grown-ups do whatever they want to do. But that isn't going to make them successful," she said.

The *It's Being Done* schools are different because they do not base decisions on what would make adults happy. They do what is best for students. "Once you put the decision-making locus on what is good for kids, it's going to be uncomfortable for the grown-ups. But when they see what a difference it makes, then they become very nice places to work," she said.

Chenoweth acknowledges that she was visiting these schools after they had experienced years of improvement.

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"I think it was uncomfortable for the adults in those buildings in the beginning because change is very difficult. In each case, the adults in there had to learn a lot, and they had to change a lot," she said.

So where exactly did these schools start their journeys toward success?

The key in every case, she said, was looking closely at data about student achievement. They took a snapshot of student learning, which was often painful to view because teachers saw an image of their work that surprised them. Then they began to map their journey. In virtually every case, that meant studying the content standards, determining whether they were teaching to those standards, and then changing their instruction.

Chenoweth tells a remarkable story about the changes at Port Chester Middle School in Port Chester, N.Y., a blue-collar town in tony Westchester County, N.Y. In the mid-1990s, a new principal tackled some of teachers' long-standing complaints about the school. After a time, the school improved. Students were well-behaved. The halls were clean. Teachers were more content and didn't transfer to other buildings.

The principal was so happy about the transformation that he nominated the school for a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon award. The state of New York recognized the school for its vast improvement in school climate, but the feds scoffed at the notion of recognizing a school with such mediocre academic performance.

During the first year of New York standards-based testing, only a third of Port Chester's student met the standards on the English language arts test and only 38% on the math exam. The numbers were even worse for the school's black and Hispanic students.

The superintendent met with the school's administrators and told them that if the school were a company, he would have shut it down.

"This was greeted with great fury by the teachers. Imagine, they were so confident that they had applied for a Blue Ribbon award! They were astonished by the data," Chenoweth said.

Rather than curl up in a corner, however, the staff embarked on what Chenoweth calls a "journey of intellectual courage." The staff read the state standards and reluctantly acknowledged that they were not teaching what they ought to be teaching. They worked with their curriculum,



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.nsd.org.

and they changed their practice.

By 2005, 68% of Port Chester's students were meeting the state's reading standard and 85% met the math standard. Performance at Port Chester has outpaced the state, including performance by various subgroups.

In 2005, the school once again applied for the Blue Ribbon award. This time, the school got the award.

"They're not perfect. They're not 100% yet. But they're on this trajectory. They've studied the standards. They've studied how to teach. They're definitely on their way," Chenoweth said.

Underlying the improvement at Port Chester and the other schools was a healthy dose of high-quality professional learning. Chenoweth says there is a "data-driven nature to their PD" that eventually enables teachers to "learn to see their children's faces in the data."

Examining the data closely with colleagues transformed these schools, she said. The data provide clear pictures of student results, but it's the discussions about the data that begin to force teachers to open the doors of their practice. "It clarifies what's going on in classrooms in a way that individual observations cannot," she said.

"Individual teachers, if they're really good, have a sense of where each student is in their own classroom. But if they're not good or still lack experience, they don't have that sense. And even really good teachers have no way of looking at what other teachers are doing," she said.

Having more knowledge about which teachers are successful with students and which are not also enables the principal to target the professional development. The principal finds ways to allow teachers to tap into Mrs. Jones'

knowledge while also providing more in-depth support for Miss Smith.

Also crucial, she said, is providing time for teachers to work with colleagues virtually every day. "That is an absolute core element of improvement," she said.

Because time for collaboration was packaged with close examination of the data, teachers learned from each other about successful practices. The regular meetings encouraged teachers to build comfort in working together and in being open about both good and bad results.

Chenoweth does not minimize the difficulties encountered by schools with large populations of struggling students. "Nobody goes into any enterprise looking to be unsuccessful. I think teachers get discouraged slowly. Eventually, if they're good, they often just try to focus on saving one or two students a year," she said.

When schools are confronted with damning results, threatened with state takeovers, criticized by the public and the press, retreating is often the easiest route to take. Standing up to the challenge of improving a school demands moral and intellectual courage and an unquenchable willingness to keep moving forward because retreat has become an unacceptable option.

"Sometimes, teachers and principals are so defensive about even the slightest criticism or piece of information that might put them in a bad light. The principals I wrote about in *It's Being Done* don't protect their schools from criticism. They use that criticism to drive improvement and make their schools good enough that they are above most criticism," she said. ■